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COULD HE DO BETTER?

BY

ARTHUR A. HOFFMANN.

' . . . Wait, and Love himself will bring
The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit
Of wisdom. Wait : my faith is large in Time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.'
TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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COULD HE DO BETTER?

CHAPTER I.

THE TOPHAMS.

MR. PETER TOPHAM, with a delicate wife, two daughters to find husbands for, and a small income, doubtless had a right to grumble now and then, and to talk of hard times. But he rarely availed himself of this privilege, or allowed anybody to suppose him discontented with his lot. Cheerfulness, on the contrary, was one of Mr. Topham's strong points, and he had a good many strong points . . . in his own

opinion. There was an inviting air of prosperity about him. His alert appearance, his brisk rubbing of hands, his knack of ready assertion, were such as mark a successful man. Peter Topham was not successful. Quite the reverse, his career had hitherto been a dead failure. But, though he lost his friends, he betrayed no regret; though he saw his argosies go down one after the other, he made no lamentation.

This cheerfulness, which grieved people of depth and feeling, sprang from various causes. Health and comfort must go for something to begin with, and Peter was as sound as a bell, and (thanks to his wife) always had a glass of good beeswing port and a choice cigar. Besides, he never laid hold of a difficulty, but he cheerfully passed it on to his wife or to his elder daughter Judith, and considered the matter disposed

of as far as he was concerned . . . except that he took credit for its ultimate settlement, or found fault if anything chanced to go wrong. This was, naturally, a bracing process.

Sometimes, indeed, there would come a disaster which he could not succeed in shuffling entirely on to other people's shoulders. Then the mainstay for his good-humour was the consideration that, whatever happened, he had taken the most rational course. He was accustomed to say that he could only do his best, and that circumstances were beyond his control . . . and they certainly were.

In person Peter Topham was short and stout, and he had so little neck that his stand-up collars pressed his forked whiskers against his smoothly-shaven double chin. His hair was reddish and rather scanty, but he had always called it auburn, and

now made the most of it by distributing the long strands with jealous care across his shining crown. His voice was sharp and thin. But he was proud of his conversational powers, and would demand attention for his happier efforts by gently sawing the air with his forefinger, and by an appropriate attitude.

He was now on the shady side of fifty, but no experience could wrest from him the comfortable conviction that everyone who differed from him was all in the wrong. He showed such offenders no mercy. They must be wanting either in sense or in candour, perhaps in both. Say what they might, Peter was sure they found his arguments unanswerable. Yet nothing in his affairs proved him to be much wiser than his fellow-creatures. Though he began his married life with a large fortune, he had been obliged to sell

the estate in Devonshire and to retire with a few hundreds a year to the little country town of Baybridge. It was a quiet, gossiping place, important only in this, that it returned one member, a Conservative. Here, true to his convictions, incurably cheerful and dogmatic, lived Peter Topham with his wife and the girls.

In choosing a wife who was not only rich, but beautiful, and in every other way admirable, Mr. Topham brought to light such an appearance of good sense that those best qualified to form an opinion put the match down to chance. A few ventured the suggestion that possibly Peter had something in him after all. Everybody agreed in prophesying that he would waste the money first, and neglect the wife to whom he owed it afterwards.

He set about wasting the money at once, but, fortunately, Mrs. Topham never suffered

much from neglect. She was almost as blind to Peter's ingrained selfishness as he himself could be; she observed only the hundred little personal attentions that he daily paid her, and shared his curious belief that he was an unusually devoted husband. Her affection was nourished by trifles so genially offered that she never allowed any suspicion that they could be cheap and hollow to gain ground in her mind . . . mercifully her mind was not as large as her heart. She was moulded out of charitable stuff, and loved to dwell on kindness. And Peter *was* kind . . . and clever! Of course he was always right! He had been unfortunate, she thought, and so wanted more love and sympathy, that was all. And Maria Topham determined that, as long as she lived, such things should never be wanting to the man who had cheerfully married her (and her

money) five-and-twenty years ago, and, through evil report and good report, cheerfully tended her still, now that the money was almost gone.

Yet Maria Topham had one grievance.

About one thing the gentle woman permitted herself to think that Peter might have been less imprudent. She cared nothing for her own privations, delicate in health though she was. But she did care for the poverty that pressed upon her children. No doubt anyone would be eager to marry Judith or Annie. Of course there were young men in and about Baybridge. But who, worthy of either of the girls, would find his way to the little town. Maria, in moments of extreme depression, had it almost in her heart to feel that the various speculations of her lord and master had deprived her daughters of the chance of rich and handsome husbands.

She wished, too, that they could be better dressed, and show off to greater advantage. The mother sometimes took an independent step for the sake of the two bright, fresh young girls to whom her beauty had been bequeathed.

Judith, her elder daughter, had inherited the larger share. She was twenty-three. A dark, graceful beauty, rather tall, well proportioned. She was obliged to be her own dressmaker; but whatever she wore was certain to be becoming and in good taste. Her face was lovable, and her hazel eyes met yours fearlessly. Her hair, which she kept tidy, but which had a will of its own to curl and frizzle, was brushed well off an open forehead that curved, delicately white, above the fine, arched eyebrows. Her nose with two little bends in it, her red lips and dimpled cheeks, and a faint, puckered crease under

her full chin . . . softened without hiding an expression of firmness that gave dignity to the whole. Her nose and chin afforded besides the slightest hint of meeting, and this peculiarity lent an odd, sweet look of premature wisdom to the face. Her sister Annie would sometimes call her 'Nut-crackers,' a pleasantry taken in good part.

At eighteen Judith had passed through a love affair. In those days when, though she had ceased to be a child, she judged everybody by the standard of her own honesty . . . a favourite trick of hers still . . . she had been cruelly deceived. A proposal had been made. Judith accepted the man, and worshipped the ground he trod on. And then came the question of dower: Judith had none but her true heart and her loveliness; and so the marriage was put off, and put off, and everyone feared

to tell her the truth. When at last it had to be hinted that perhaps a poor wife was not looked for, Judith fired up and defended the object of her choice. He was totally unworthy of her confidence, and he went his way, and for many months all her life seemed a blank.

She rallied : youth, pride, her mother's and her sister's tenderness, time . . . all these exerted healing influence. At length her deserter married far beneath him, and soon afterwards left the country. So, at the end of five years, the wrong that had been done to Judith had entirely lost its power to pain. This epoch of her life has been glanced at only because of its abiding stress upon her character. She was not likely to fall a victim to selfishness a second time.

Judith had spent one season in London before poverty deprived her of any further

opportunity of studying that great kaleidoscope, Society. Being quick, sympathetic, and a lady at heart, she had profited by this brief experience. But she had not had time to slide into a groove, and so, while recognising what was due to her dignity, remained unconventional, and regarded more the spirit than the letter of the social laws.

And now she had responsibilities which rendered her rather unlike other girls of her own age. To her all family difficulties ultimately found their way; for her father was too cheerful to attend to them, and her mother was not often equal to the task of making both ends meet. Judith was financier, housekeeper, general manager. To curb her father's extravagance so that her mother might now and then have some of the little comforts that ill-health demanded, to look after the servants, to write

letters and to return calls . . . these were some of Judith's many employments.

Peter Topham's elder daughter was a standing protest against the assumption that most women are more or less unreasonable. Judith was reasonable. She was a standing protest also against the further assumption that, if by any chance a reasonable woman could be found, that woman was necessarily strong-minded, disagreeable, and a bigot. She was liked by those whose good opinion was of value, because in her, sound, clear sense and warm feelings were held in even balance. Judith's character had weight; when she spoke, people listened. Now and then a stranger, wondering at these qualities, which he hardly found in her parents, would be told that they perhaps descended from Peter's mother, who had been a woman of vigorous conduct and lofty aims.

Annie was four years younger than her sister, whom, on a much smaller scale, she somewhat resembled in form and in feature. Yet her face was a pretty face, nothing more. It had none of the individuality of Judith's, nothing that bore witness to the habit of reflection or of self-communion. Annie had little employment and few resources; she usually depended upon others for help and amusement. The idle, spoilt pet of the family, she expected everything to be done for her, and no cloud had hitherto dimmed her young life. Sorrow had not yet opened her mind to large and tolerant views. So she was subject to a host of petty failings, with a touch at least of her father's selfishness; and she was as wholly unreasonable as any detractor of her sex could desire. She had a merry heart, and would poke fun at everybody, including her father, enjoying

a jest at him all the more because he never suspected such a liberty could be taken. Altogether, Annie Topham was a bright, feather-headed, and improvable little person . . . and a chatterbox into the bargain.

Such is a brief but faithful account of the Topham family. Peter was the most disagreeable, Maria the most meek, while Annie was the most frivolous.

Stately Judith had the clearest head among them all, and the warmest heart. That was admitted even in Baybridge.

CHAPTER II.

A FAMILY JAR.

THE town-hall clock had just struck nine, and, in the darkness of a last September night, the wind, which had been gathering force all the afternoon, rushed up the river and down the broad High Street, and through the narrow lanes and alleys of Baybridge. It was not long in reaching the outskirts, and soon moaned under the Tophams' windows, and tossed the laurel tops in the garden to and fro, and played helter-skelter with the fallen leaves. Then it died away gradually. After a pause came a steady downpour of rain.

A pleasant contrast to the drip, drip, drip outside was the genial glow from the fire in Mr. Topham's dining-room grate, as it threw its ruddy beams and warm comfort on the family grouped around the hearth.

Dinner was over, but dessert was still on the table; from which, after the old fashion, the cloth had been taken away, so as to show the dark, rich brown of the mahogany.

Before the fire, then, sat Mr. Topham, his wife, and his daughters. Peter, displaying a broad surface of dazzling shirt-front, was very much at his ease in a soft arm-chair, with one foot on the shining fender-rail, and the other bent over and lazily extended towards the glow. By his knees was a dessert-plate with some walnuts which Annie had peeled for him, and a little pyramid of salt beside them. His

chubby fingers could just reach his glass of port wine on the edge of the table.

His wife was in a dark-brown silk, slightly open at the throat ; for her delicate chest prevented her from wearing a low dress. She held a fan between her face and the fire, and her mild eyes were fixed upon her husband opposite as she tried to absorb the wisdom which flowed from his lips. She appeared, notwithstanding, to be rather anxious, and nervously handled the only ornament she wore . . . a small, gold locket.

Judith's beautiful neck and arms were seen to advantage in a well-fitting but plain black dress, the sober effect of which she had relieved by a rose in her hair and another at her bosom. She sat between her parents, and was also evidently turning something over in her mind ; while one of her hands, rather red from household occupations, if the truth must be told, mechan-

ically played with a rebellious lock of Annie's hair. For Annie was on a footstool, with her head on her sister's lap, peeling some more walnuts for papa, and munching one herself whenever the supply exceeded the demand.

On the rug, indifferent to any worldly cares now that bones and tit-bits had gone kitchenwards, lay stretched in luxurious repose a small Dachshund, called Jumper. Not that he jumped or that any such activity was to be expected; but his predecessor had been a poodle and *had* jumped, and Annie wouldn't have the name altered. So the non-jumping Jumper lay at peace, though one of his hanging ears twitched now and then, showing that he belonged to the family, and had a right to listen to the conversation, if not actually so employed.

‘What a comfort,’ said Mr. Topham,

drawing a red-grey whisker across his smooth chin, 'to think of all that is done for the suffering poor now-a-days. On a night like this, for example, with the rain drenching the fields and the roads, what a comfort to think of retreats, poor-houses, soup-kitchens, hospitals, and other charitable institutions.'

Mr. Topham, sure that he had spoken with feeling and good sense, released his whisker, took a sip of his '63, and waited for approval. It came at once.

'Certainly, Peter,' said his wife. 'Very consoling indeed. I have no doubt the poor people are grateful.'

'They ought to be,' said Mr. Topham.'

'I'm afraid,' interposed Judith, 'that there will be many homeless wanderers to-night. It's sad to think of them, especially of the scantily-clad children. Just listen to the rain!'

‘Cats and dogs,’ said Annie. ‘Papa, another walnut?’

‘Homeless,’ said her father, in answer to Judith, ‘of course there will. You complain because the system doesn’t include everybody. It doesn’t pretend to. Quite possibly, within our immediate neighbourhood, at this very moment, some tramp finds himself unequal to the conditions for prolonging his existence.—Annie, my love, a couple more.—Consider, Judith, that no system can be perfect. Evils exist, and must be faced. I’m sure I for one have borne that fact in mind.’

A smile came to Judith’s lips, but it vanished as she looked at her mother, and noted the streaks of white above her temples, and heard her say,

‘Yes, Peter, you have done your best. We are all contented and happy.’

‘We *are* happy,’ answered Mr. Topham.

‘I should be astonished to find it otherwise. What have I got to complain of? Nothing. I had a large fortune, which, it is true, has been reduced by adverse circumstances that neither foresight, nor, I may add, a fair degree of ability, has been able to control. Yet enough remains for ease, if not for luxury. Take us now as we gather round the fire. We have had a good dinner, we are well clothed . . . that silk becomes you as much as ever, Maria . . . and the young ladies have, I think, no cause for anxiety of any kind. I question, my dear,’ concluded Mr. Topham, addressing his wife, ‘whether a cheque for a thousand pounds, payable to P. Topham, Esquire, and handed to me at this moment, could make me more thoroughly happy, or more grateful for the blessings I enjoy.’

He leaned back with his eyes half-closed. But this time there was no echo, and its

absence was so unusual as to partly rouse Mr. Topham from his complacency. He turned to his wife, and saw every sign of distress in her thin, weary face.

‘It’s nothing,’ said she, hesitatingly, in reply to his eager inquiry. And then, plucking up courage, she said to Judith, ‘Perhaps you had better tell your father.’

‘I can make a guess beforehand,’ cried Mr. Topham, playfully. ‘Whenever my pretty Chancellor of the Exchequer is called upon, I know that advice is wanted about the next budget. Well, my child?’

Judith and her mother had been in perplexity all day, and the former was hurt at her father’s ill-timed banter. She answered, rather tartly, that Davis had that morning sent in his account for fifty-three pound odd, with a peremptory demand for payment.

Davis was not a grasping attorney with unlimited opportunities for mischief; he was simply Mr. Topham's tailor, and his bill had been owing many a long day. His letter had naturally been addressed to Mr. Topham. But that gentleman, who had become familiar with the handwriting, had left the unwelcome document to be opened by his wife or daughter. From the deliberate manner in which he now stroked his unpaid-for trousers, and from the low, long-drawn whistle with which he accompanied that operation, it may be inferred that he was giving the matter his most profound consideration; a long pause ensued.

‘Davis once more!’ he said at length. ‘Fifty-three pound odd. Well, we were bound to hear from him sooner or later. What’s distressing in the occurrence, Judith?’

‘Mother has had to sell her diamond ring to make up the amount,’ said Judith, struggling for patience.

‘Indeed, Peter, I couldn’t help it,’ said his wife, with tears in her eyes. ‘You mustn’t be vexed. I loved the ring, and let it go with a hard pang. It was the first thing you gave me after Judith was born, and lately, when my finger got too thin for it, I kept it in its place with the signet-ring. Don’t be vexed, Peter. Davis wouldn’t wait; he wrote something about proceedings. Judith thought there was no time to be lost.’

‘I understand, then, that the bill is paid,’ said Mr. Topham. ‘Now let’s forget all about it. That’s the only true philosophy. Some people mope about bad luck that’s coming, and others about bad luck that’s going. Let us be wiser. Maria, I’ll give you another ring some

day. Judith shall have diamonds of her own, too. We must find you a husband, Judith, with good looks and a good income to boot. Matrimony,' added he, with a gallant look at Maria, 'is a compensation for the ills of life.'

Judith made no remark. But Annie, who had been unusually quiet during the foregoing conversation, now struck in.

'No, no, papa, you must get me a husband first. Jue knows very well how to take care of herself. Everybody runs after Jue. I'm not going to be overlooked, I can tell you. Jue is to tell all her suitors that my wedding-day is to come before hers, and then they'll send their younger brothers to me. I had made up my mind to fall in love with Cris Parry. He's been very attentive lately. But I've had to resign him, for I don't think he'll ever make up his mind.'

Annie, with more rattle than sense, was nevertheless often of use in driving away any little gloom that gathered on the family horizon. Everybody now laughed as she mentioned the name of Cris Parry, whose acquaintance is to be made later on.

‘You might do worse than marry the young fellow, Annie,’ said her father, who was never contradicted by Cris.

‘Young, papa!’ replied Annie. ‘He’s as old as the hills.’

‘His languid manner makes him seem older than he is,’ said Mrs. Topham.

‘He’s not thirty yet,’ added Judith. ‘And a more amiable fellow never lived; though one can’t help wishing he had at least some energy.’

‘I like him,’ said Mr. Topham, judicially, ‘because he’s open to conviction. I was talking to him on Thursday about Ireland, and he expressed himself with much sound

sense; agreed with me on every point. Not that I set up for being a politician, but some value has now and then been attached to my opinions by competent judges. Yes, Parry is sensible; an agreeable contrast to that arrogant ass, Ambrose Jackson. If you'll believe such a thing, Maria, he took upon himself to contradict me flatly about the best opposition policy, and actually brought forward reasons to support his extravagant ideas. I sha'n't encourage *him* to call at my house.'

Judith had flushed on hearing Ambrose Jackson spoken of, and she flushed still more at her father's vehement injustice. Though she knew Mrs. Jackson well, she had met Ambrose, her son, only twice. Nothing had passed between them but the most common civilities that follow a formal introduction. Yet she had thought a good deal about Ambrose. She resembled

him in having a strong individuality and definite aims, and was conscious that in some way she had fellowship with him. This feeling urged her to exclaim,

‘Compare Cris Parry with Mr. Jackson! I wonder it could be thought of! Mr. Jackson may be wrong in politics, father; of course you have more experience than is possible at his age. But at least you will own that he has convictions, and acts up to them. His can never be called an idle, unmeaning existence, like Cris Parry’s. I, for my part, would sooner have to do with a man who goes wrong than with a poor creature who doesn’t go at all. I have sympathy for failure, none for indolence. And I think, father, that Mr. Jackson, whatever faults he may have, is sincere and thorough.’

Mr. Topham, being always in the right, had seldom any reason for losing his tem-

per; nor did he lose it now at this display of insubordination in the bosom of his family. He roused his eyebrows in mild, amused surprise, and nodded to Judith almost encouragingly, as much as to say, 'Go on, my dear, go on, I will show clearly that you are in the wrong when the proper time comes.'

But Judith had done for the present. Her mother tried to stave off any discussion by saying that her father was ready for his cigar. Up jumped Annie, and soon brought the cigars, matches, and little bronze ash-pan to his side. He caught up his elder daughter's last words, and said,

'Sincere? Thorough? Not a bit of it. You are easily imposed on. Ambrose Jackson is a humbug, almost a hypocrite. I saw in every line of his face while he was contradicting me . . . me, old

enough to be his father . . . that he knows he hasn't a leg to stand on. He thinks push is everything. He has caught up some new-fangled unformed notions which he tries to pass off as wisdom by the help of bold assertion. Sincere, indeed! You'll give him talent next! Ambrose Jackson has ambition without intellect, and is equally wanting in common sense, and in common honesty.'

This was Johnsonian, and Peter was satisfied. Judith retorted quickly,

'Father, how can you be so unkind and so unjust! Just because he's not of your opinion!'

Judith was all the more angry because, although it was palpable enough that her father had grossly misrepresented Ambrose, there was a slight leaven of truth in his censure; and, once and for all, she had that fellow-feeling already alluded to.

She would have said more in his defence now, but a lump rose in her throat, and prevented her from uttering another word.

Her father replied, with undisturbed equanimity,

‘What’s this, Judith? Have you fallen in love with the young gentleman that you champion him with so much spirit? I warn you that he is the last person I should admit within my doors as a future son-in-law.’

This was beyond endurance. Judith rose from her seat.

‘I haven’t fallen in love with Mr. Jackson, or with anyone else. I have seen him only twice, and I’m far from supposing that he has, or ever will have, any partiality for me. I have plenty of fault to find with him, but where’s the necessity for injustice? It will, I think,

be time enough to refuse him admittance here under the circumstances you suggest when he has asked for that honour.'

'Judith!' cried her mother. 'How can you forget yourself so? Your father was only in jest. You owe him more respect. Beg his pardon at once.'

There was a pause, and a sharp struggle in Judith's breast. Then she went to her father, kissed his forehead, and begged his pardon for having spoken hastily and rudely.

He returned her caress, saying,

'You have a good heart,; but you must be more reasonable. Really you must. Break yourself of the fatal habit of supposing that you can't make a mistake. That's very odious in anybody. And, rely upon it, my estimate of young Jackson is correct; I have an eye for character.—There, child, no tears. I

forgive you. Let's hear no more about it.'

'And now,' cried Annie, 'we'll leave papa to wrap himself up in clouds of smoke. Come along, mother, before the puffing begins, and sets you coughing. Come along, Jue. Come along, lazy old Jumper. And, papa, I shall be back in precisely twenty minutes, and woe be unto you if I find you asleep as I did yesterday.'

'Never fear, Annie, you'll find me reading the *Times*.'

Mrs. Topham, after she had been carefully enveloped in a shawl by her attentive and thoughtful husband, led the way into the drawing-room. She was soon busy consoling Judith, who had still a few tears to shed: then they became engrossed in a settlement of certain household affairs.

Annie tried a new gavotte. Then,

going into the dining-room again, she found her prophecy fulfilled, and her father sound asleep, with an expression of indescribable contentment upon his features.

Later on, Judith, who was in a very penitent mood, challenged her father to play draughts, and let him win every game. Mrs. Topham looked on, admiring her husband's skill. Annie romped on the hearth-rug with Jumper. And the rest of the evening was spent in perfect harmony, without any further allusion to Ambrose Jackson and his supposed shortcomings.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. TWEEDY AND HER HUSBAND.

ON our way to the Jacksons, who lived more than a mile from Judith's home, we must peep into a trim detached villa which stood about half-way between these two establishments. For it would never do to overlook such an important personage as Mrs. Tweedy, of Llewelyn House.

A Mr. Tweedy did exist; there were also five little Tweedys, all young ladies, who ranged from four months to seven years old. The father never seemed anxious to impress the fact of his existence on society, but his offspring took after

their mother, and proclaimed theirs in every key at all hours of the day.

On the morning after the discussion, just recorded, between Judith and Mr. Topham, Mr. Tweedy sat alone in his wife's drawing-room, close to the open door. He was busily perusing a volume on the law of trespass and kindred subjects, for he had once thought of adopting the law as a profession; and had lately, through his wife's influence, been made a magistrate. But he was studying under difficulties. A new nurse had just been engaged for Nora, Dora, Augusta, and Co., and Mr. Tweedy was instructed to see that she was up to her business, and that none of the children got burnt or swallowed anything irretrievably during their mother's absence. In fact, it was with them that his wife had left him, and, though he had escaped from their boisterous caresses, he

intended to be found in their company when she returned. As soon as he heard his wife's quick tread on the gravel walk outside, he would stroll leisurely upstairs. Poor Mr. Tweedy!

He used to have more spirit; but a series of misfortunes had weighed him down. His misfortunes were five in number. He was fond of them, from Nora down to the latest arrival, and amused them by the hour: still they *were* disappointments.

Mr. Tweedy was disheartened: he had so longed for a boy. And people laughingly said, that, if a son was born at Llewelyn House, Mrs. Tweedy would no longer rule the roast there. Others agreed, adding, that, meek as he seemed, James could be jealous on occasion, and that his wife was fond of gadding, and had better mind what she was about. A libel! Mrs. Tweedy was as good as gold.

That plump, brisk little woman, her face aglow with health, and spirits, and eagerness, came in sight, and pushed open the garden gate. She had an umbrella and a collection of small parcels in one hand, and her purse in the other: and without these accompaniments she was seldom to be seen abroad. Gossip, good-natured gossip, was Mrs. Tweedy's great resource. She had the peculiarity of leaving the purse, or the umbrella, or a parcel, or something else belonging to her, at her friends' houses. She was always coming back for her property, so that you never knew when Mrs. Tweedy was really gone. She never wasted her conversation on unattentive listeners. She chose a victim, and for that victim, until she pleased, there was no escape. All attempts at rescue she bravely repulsed. She drove away any interposing party with resistless

energy and charming good-humour. There was no being angry with Mrs. Tweedy ; even when she cooped you up in a corner, and bobbed up and down mirthfully, and gave point to her remarks by slight digs, prods, and stabs with the crook of the favourite umbrella, or familiar taps with the purse and parcels. Whenever other subjects were exhausted : her children . . . their teething, ailments, nurses, accidents, clever sayings, affectionate dispositions ; together with James's devoted behaviour to them and her own anxieties . . . provided material, which, with the usual amount of repetition, had all the qualities of the widow's cruse.

She panted upstairs, and took her husband by surprise. He had just come upon a nice distinction in law, and had forgotten all about his charge.

'James,' said his wife, 'didn't I leave you with the children ?'

‘Well, yes, Kitty; I *was* with them till just this moment . . . I mean, I came down a short time ago. Reading was impossible with Nora and her sisters clinging to me.’

‘Sweet things all of them!’ cried Mrs. Tweedy, ‘such affection, even in the baby, it’s quite remarkable at her age. Listen, now, James, I’ve had the most busy morning. First of all, I called at the Jacksons, found the mother less nervous than usual, and had a long talk with Ambrose. How agreeable and intelligent he is, James. Then I went on to Pickersgill’s, and told him that last Sunday’s beef was a shame and a scandal.’

‘So it was, Kitty: tough, stringy, bad every way.’

‘That’s what I told him. “Another joint like that, Mr. Pickersgill,” said I, “and you’ve seen your last order from Llewelyn House.” I told him that even Nora (she is

sharp beyond her years, James) said it could be eaten only by savages.'

'*We* ate it, my dear,' suggested Mr. Tweedy, whose gentle melancholy caught at the faintest indication of a joke.

'Next,' said his wife, paying him no attention, 'I went . . . where did I go next? O yes, to the Tophams. I'm thankful to say Mr. Topham was out, giving a lesson in horticulture to his gardener. Those are the best and dearest of girls: Judith and Annie, Judith's my favourite. I shall say a good word for her whenever I get the chance, you may depend upon it. I shouldn't wonder if she married well. And she need, for I fancy, James, that money's very scarce in her home. The women are thrifty enough, but Peter! Their washerwoman (I met her coming from Pickersgill's) told me that Mr. Topham still wore two shirts a day regularly,

and gave more trouble with his linen than any other man in the parish. And then the expense, James, just think of the expense.'

James was decidedly of opinion that the expense was unjustifiable.

'As I came up the hill,' continued Mrs. Tweedy, 'whom do you think I met?'

'My brother magistrate, Mr. Tucker,' guessed her husband. 'He probably put you to the torture, after his fashion.'

'No, not Mr. Tucker,' replied the little woman, 'I had better luck than that. I met Captain Handcock.'

'And accepted his escort home, I dare say?' said Mr. Tweedy.

His wife stared; but she made no answer. She took off her gloves. She was astonished that James should address her in that tone: and silence seemed the most becoming.

Captain Handcock, formerly of the Bengal Army, had lived some time in Baybridge, where he was well known both in the drawing-rooms and at the club. He was a big-limbed, swaggering man of five-and-fifty or more, who, after spending his youth and middle-age in, it was rumoured, no very creditable manner, was at present in search of a wife to take care of him in his declining years. He was willing to dispense with beauty or youth, or even good-nature; but not with a few snug hundreds in the funds. Until he could find a lady with this qualification, and willingness to bestow it upon him, he amused himself by paying civilities to any pretty woman who came in his way. He had thus honoured Mrs. Tweedy, and dropped a few seeds of jealousy into the mind of her husband.

Mr. Tweedy now repeated his question:

had Captain Handcock walked part of the way home with Kate.

Kate said, yes ; and that he had been most entertaining, as he always was.

‘ I wish,’ persisted her husband, ‘ you would keep him at a distance. I strongly object to the man.’

‘ Why?’ asked she, with her must provoking air.

‘ He’s bad style, and I don’t choose to have your name associated with his.’

There is no saying how Mrs. Tweedy would have faced this new attitude of her husband’s. For, at that moment, a piercing scream came from the nursery.

The mother, who had gathered up her parcels, now dropped them, gave a corresponding shriek, and rushed upstairs to the scene of woe. Here she found that Dora, who had seen a conjuror lately, had succeeded in convincing Augusta that she

(Augusta) had swallowed a packet of needles, and might expect them to come out at different parts of her body as soon as she began to walk. Mrs. Tweedy's practical suggestion that her darling should walk up and down and try, was carried out with a soothing effect; and, as her voice could be heard all over the house, her husband learned to his delight that the noisy crew were to be washed, and taken out for a walk before luncheon.

'I declare,' said he, taking up his book again, 'if it wasn't for Kitty, I'd run away, and cut the whole thing, hang me if I wouldn't. There they go again! Washing has begun, and they can't be whipped properly, because they're girls!'

And, with profound disgust, the long-suffering man shut the Babel out, and hoped for, rather than expected, a quiet quarter-of-an-hour. But he could not

study. He might have been heard muttering 'Handcock,' and banging the table with his book as if it were the gallant captain's head. In this occupation, we must leave him, and pay the intended visit to Mrs. Jackson and her son Ambrose.

CHAPTER IV.

‘YOUR COUNTRY MAID WOULDN’T DO.’

Mrs. JACKSON was a thin, fragile woman with firmly marked and yet delicate features. For many years she had been a widow. Her marriage had been an unfortunate event in several respects. It had given mortal offence to her own family and to her husband’s: to her own, because the man she had chosen was as unprincipled and thriftless as he was handsome and charming; to his, because she drove a richer rival from the field. But Mrs. Jackson did not care whose favour she forfeited, as long as she kept her

husband's love. Scapegrace though he was, he loved her well and truly ; until, a year after their marriage, he died suddenly, leaving her and their infant son slenderly provided for.

Helen Jackson, hitherto accounted a weak, dependent creature, displayed courage and resource under these trying circumstances. She determined to give little Ambrose a good education. She neglected no steps to secure his prosperity in the future ; and applied to his father's relations and to her own with penitent humility. She was rudely repulsed. But the longing to earn something, to put something by for her boy, led to the discovery that her taste for drawing and painting could become profitable. At first she had to undergo much disappointment and weariness. But necessity quickened and enlarged her powers, while experience

taught her the conditions of the market. A demand arose for her pictures : Ambrose was sent to a first-rate school.

As the son grew up, he gave proofs of considerable ability, and so obtained what had been refused to his mother’s prayers : the goodwill of old Mr. Jackson, his grandfather. Mr. Jackson liked the lad none the less for the fearless way in which he resented any slight offered to his mother, and at the squire’s death a sum of ten thousand pounds was placed in trust for his grandchild.

Ambrose inherited not only some of the old man’s money, but much of his decision and energy of character. These qualities were strengthened by the influences shed on him from early boyhood. He could not be on good terms with the world that neglected his mother’s goodness and worth. He aspired to make himself and her in-

dependent of it by some solid success, and at sixteen he entered a City office with a firmer determination to push his way, and a more just appreciation of the difficulties that would beset his path, than is often seen in one so young.

When he came of age, the first use he made of his fortune was to extract as much of a promise as he could from his mother that she would never again resort to her brush except for amusement. By that time he had become almost indispensable to his employers; while the same thoughtful activity that pleased them procured him many friends for his leisure hours. He loved to be king of his company, and, though sometimes overbearing, found not a few subjects obedient to his rule.

A year later, an event took place which, though not so profitable, promised a wider

sway to his ambition; and he eagerly availed himself of the opportunity, for he coveted influence and position rather than money. The event was this. A bill, for the better payment of a certain class of public servants, had been brought forward by a rising politician of the day, and supported by the whole weight of the opposition. Ambrose Jackson, who had perhaps more decided views upon politics than his information warranted, was especially interested in this case, as he had several friends concerned. He drew up their claims in a letter addressed to one of the evening papers. The letter was not only published, but pronounced extremely able. Further contributions followed; and their author eventually made the acquaintance of more than one politician of note. When he was twenty-three he was offered a private secretaryship, accepted, and threw

himself heart and soul into his new vocation.

He throve as men of his stamp will always thrive. Though supported by neither wealth nor family, he fixed on a seat in Parliament as the object of his ambition. His capacity for labour was great, and he possessed the useful talent of making himself useful. But, though he thus throve by dint of youth, vigour, and cleverness, here and there a keen-sighted observer would point out the rock upon which would split the fortunes of the young workman, namely, his disregard, not for the interest or rights, but for the feelings of other people. Ambrose was honourable, just, true as steel to those among whom he had cast his lot. But the bond of union was interest, not affection. As for his enemies, he neither gave nor expected quarter. Let the weak fall, and the

oward sink, and victory be to the wise and to the strong!

His mother alone shared his confidence, lived in his ambition, and kept the lamp of love alive in his heart. And she deserved all the sweetness that he could lavish upon her. Her state of health prevented her from remaining in London where her son’s home must necessarily be. The discovery was a blow to many a fond hope, but she bore the trial bravely and judiciously. The next best thing was to serve his interests in Baybridge, where his political friends had a firm footing, and where (but this was still a dead secret) he hoped to succeed the present member, now very old. So Mrs. Jackson took a little house here, made friends with all the neighbours, occupied her leisure in the pursuit of her art, and consoled herself with her son’s frequent visits.

Mother and son had not, however, met for a week, a longer interval than usual. Ambrose arrived with his travelling bag shortly before luncheon, and kissed his mother with the utmost affection. He was tender in his inquiries about her health: the sorrow and over-exertion of former days had given rise to a nervous disorder that seemed incurable. As Mrs. Tweedy had already found out that morning, Mrs. Jackson was stronger than she had been for some time, and Ambrose was in high spirits to see how much better she looked.

‘Only get strong, mother,’ he said, as they sat down to luncheon. ‘I will answer for the rest.’

‘To see you successful and happy, Ambrose, is all I want.’

‘Everything goes well,’ answered he, with a smile. ‘Just before leaving town

I had an offer . . . rather a good thing, I fancy. I am to supply some local reports for a new paper. The pay will be good, the work nothing to an industrious man. And my colleagues will be creditable acquaintance.’

‘Careful as ever, Ambrose, as to whom you know!’

‘Yes, mother, You understand what I think about that. Years ago I made up my mind to touch nothing that was not excellent in its kind. You hear it said of somebody, “He has not over many wits, but he’s a harmless good fellow.” In other words, the man’s a fool, and nothing for my market. I was asked to a dinner the other day, and the wine was shocking bad. Now, no one has any business to set bad wine before me. He’s not obliged to invite me, but, if he does, I expect the same consideration that I show to my own guests.’

‘And your little suppers, Ambrose?’

‘Are as good as money and care can make them, mother. Of course a single man is not expected to entertain. But, when I do ask a few friends, I give them the best of everything. And I ask only those who have got something to say; I won’t have a dull table. But there, I mustn’t prose about myself the whole afternoon. It’s your fault, mother; for you will know everything that concerns me. How’s old Sir Hugh?’

Sir Hugh Danvers was the member for the borough.

Mrs. Jackson was sometimes distressed at the coolness with which her son regarded the possibility of the old Conservative being removed to a world where even whips cease from troubling. Ambrose saw what was passing in her mind now.

‘Don’t think, mother,’ said he, ‘I want

anything to happen to the worthy gentleman. But he ought, for mere decency’s sake, to retire and make room for a younger and more active man. I hope you keep in with everybody, mother? What visitors have you had lately?’

‘Mrs. Tweedy was here this morning.’

‘Ah, she’s not likely to be of much use to me. But she talks so much, and is so well known, that it’s as well to be on good terms with her. And then her husband (such as he is) has a sort of a standing.’

Such subjects occupied them during luncheon, and then Ambrose led his mother into the drawing-room, and drew an arm-chair for her up to the fire.

‘The Tophams came yesterday; the girls,’ said Mrs. Jackson.

‘Provincial rather!’ said Ambrose. ‘Don’t know how to dress, make their own clothes, and all that sort of thing. I must

say I like a fine, distinguished-looking, well-dressed woman.'

'The Tophams are a very good family, dear boy.'

'Yes, mother, I've no doubt. What's become of Cris Parry? I haven't seen him for ages.'

'He was here on Thursday, inquiring after you, in his dear listless way,' said Mrs. Jackson. 'Don't you agree with me, Ambrose dear, that Judith Topham is a remarkably handsome girl?'

A smile flitted over the young man's pleasant features, for his habit of close attention often enabled him to guess what others had in their thoughts, and this was especially the case with his mother. He now took her by the hand, and, looking her fondly in the face, shook his head, and replied, in a tone of gentle raillery,

'Mother, mother, conspiracy has no

chance with me. Don’t forget that I live in an atmosphere of plot and intrigue.’

‘And who is plotting now?’ said his mother, blushing a little though, as she spoke.

‘You are, mother; for my welfare of course, as usual; but still a dangerous plotter. I foresee a far-reaching, well-cooked scheme for uniting your dutiful son Ambrose in the bonds of holy matrimony to Miss Judith Topham. I daren’t confess her handsome for fearing of compromising myself.’

‘How quick you are, Ambrose,’ protested Mrs. Jackson, admiringly. ‘But I’m not as guilty as you suppose. I was not thinking of Judith Topham exactly in that way. But I should like to see you married, and married to a good woman. Who knows how long I may be spared you.’

It was not want of heart that prevented

Ambrose from being duly impressed by this reflection. It was custom. His mother often chose to take this desponding view of the future ; and he had learned to treat it cheerfully for her sake.

‘ Now, mother, what an idea ! You have chosen Judith Topham because she’s the only young lady in the place (except her sister) who doesn’t look like a sack tied across the middle.’

‘ No, Ambrose, not altogether that. She has a fine character.’

‘ Agreed,’ replied Ambrose, ‘ from the little I’ve seen of her. But allowing her to be handsome and everything else doesn’t prove her set apart to be Mrs. Jackson junior. Really, mother, you look far ahead. I have barely spoken to her. Perhaps we should hate each other like poison. Perhaps, probably, she would have nothing to say to me.’

This possibility had evidently never occurred to Mrs. Jackson ; she naturally thought anyone would be proud to receive a proposal from Ambrose.

‘You treat the matter too seriously, Ambrose,’ she said, and tried to turn the conversation.

‘And yet you were serious enough, mother ; I saw it in your face.’

‘I am anxious, Ambrose.’

‘An anxiety, mother, and you have not yet given me my share of it?’ said the young man, with a caress.

‘I haven’t liked to say much hitherto, Ambrose, for fear of vexing you. Very well, I’ll speak out now . . . I have had more than one hint lately from some of your friends and supporters . . . no, no, I must not mention names. They say that you have energy and talent, and will push your way ; but at too great a cost. They com-

plain that, though you could be charming if you chose, you understand nothing of the arts of conciliation, and make an enemy for every step you climb.'

Mrs. Jackson, though of a fault-finding nature, very rarely ventured to find fault even in this indirect manner with her son ; and she waited nervously to see how he would meet the implied rebuke. He replied, somewhat hastily,

'They are right, I do make enemies. But I can hold my own against them all. A fig for the man who bows to the fickle opinions of chatterers and dullards. I hate the bear-and-forbear, the give-and-take system ; it's poor, it's weak, and it doesn't pay. I can do better. After all, I'm the best judge of the means to gain my own ends.' And then he added, more softly, for his mother looked hurt : 'But what has all this got to do with marrying, and giving in marriage, dearest mother ?'

‘Everything, Ambrose. You are engaged in a hard, unforgiving struggle. Even I, who see so little of your doings, know . . . forgive me, my child . . . how ready you sometimes are to use an instrument, and then to fling it aside. I’m not clever like you; but I have ripe experience. To pursue such a policy is to buy present success with future unhappiness. Now if you had a wife, a loving, sensible, clever woman, who could heal the wounds you inflict, your progress would be safer and less arduous.’

Ambrose was struck with his mother’s earnestness. He remained for a few moments in thought, with his chin on his hand; and then answered,

‘Yes, mother, you are right. I’ve often thought it would be advisable for me to marry. A woman could do so much to further my plans.’

‘Besides loving you, and taking care of

you, Ambrose,' said his mother, with a suppressed sigh.

'Of course,' replied he. 'But the thing has its drawbacks. Above all, your country maid wouldn't do, mother: even supposing I had time to fall desperately in love with her. I can imagine no greater humiliation to a man who has risen perhaps beyond expectation than to have a wife unable to keep pace with him. No, mother, I'll belong to you for some years longer.—What time is Andrew coming for you this afternoon?'

Andrew was an old pensioner, whose business it was to push Mrs. Jackson about in her bath-chair. For the invalid was unequal to much walking.

'I must stay in, dear; Andrew has sprained his ankle.'

'Never mind, mother. Get your things on. I can manage as well as Andrew, I

daresay. Fresh air is the one thing needful for you.’

Mrs. Jackson objected; what would people think?

‘What they please,’ answered Ambrose, laughing.

And so mother and son soon started: the latter quite indifferent to public opinion; and Mrs. Jackson a little nervous, and fondly proud of her escort. Only once was she really wanting in courage, and that was when an old-fashioned closed carriage came in sight.

‘It’s Mrs. Robertson,’ exclaimed she.

Mrs. Robertson was a very old lady, conscientious, good-natured, wealthy, and much given to hospitality.

‘Mrs. Robertson won’t eat us, mother,’ laughed Ambrose.

When the lumbering vehicle reached Mrs. Jackson’s bath-chair, its occupant

tugged energetically at the check-string: the footman scrambled down, and opened the window. A pinched eager face, softened by a bunch of white curls on each side, was thrust out, and a voice shrill but sweet exclaimed,

‘Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Jackson . . . is that Mrs. Jackson?’

‘Yes, m’m,’ prompted the footman, in a low voice, before the lady addressed had time to answer.

‘How d’ye do, Mrs. Jackson?’ continued the shrill voice. ‘Who’s that young man pushing your chair?’

‘My son Ambrose,’ replied Mrs. Jackson. ‘Ambrose—Mrs. Roberston.’

‘How d’ye do, Mr. Jackson?’ came from the little bobbing head. ‘Why don’t you ever come to see me? I’m an old woman, I suppose.’

Ambrose replied that he had never before had the honour of an invitation.

‘I shall expect you,’ replied old Mrs. Robertson. ‘I shall expect to see him, Mrs. Jackson. Good-bye, Mrs. Jackson. Good-bye, young gentleman.’

Back went the head, up went the window, and the carriage lumbered on as before.

‘Curious old lady,’ said Ambrose.

‘But kind,’ answered his mother. ‘She has a great deal of influence here among the electors.’

‘I shall certainly call upon her,’ said Ambrose.

CHAPTER V.

TWO CREEDS.

ALTHOUGH she knew that Ambrose was only in fun when he called her a conspirator, Mrs. Jackson had her reasons for feeling rather guilty. Without his knowledge she had become intimate with Judith Topham, the intimacy having sprung up in the following manner. Mrs. Jackson tried to avoid living altogether on her son's bounty, and she did at least some work for the picture-dealers every day, and concealed the fact from Ambrose. Now, she happened to mention to Judith, (who shared her taste for painting), the

difficulty of finding a model. Judith wondered if she could be of any use. Mrs. Jackson accepted the offer thankfully, and took Judith into her confidence. And whenever time could be spared (Ambrose being absent) her young friend came to pose, and the pictures made rapid progress.

Notwithstanding the difference of age, a firm friendship sprang up between the two women. Mrs. Jackson looked forward to these short but frequent visits, for on many points, which her son, being a man, could not understand, she received sympathy from Judith. Judith, too, gained much advantage from the intercourse; she had many difficulties to contend with, and often needed advice which neither her parents nor her sister was capable of giving. Mrs. Jackson made up for the want. Ambrose was naturally often the subject of Mrs. Jackson's conversation, and, as she

grew familiar with Judith's many good qualities, she had day-dreams in which their future flowed together. Judith was impressed not so much by the mother's praise of her son, as by the great care and attention which he showed for her happiness. So that, taking all together, Mrs. Jackson, as we have said, had her reasons for being rather guilty.

‘You have got quite a colour, mother,’ said Ambrose, as they finished their afternoon tea. ‘You must go out every day.’

‘I will, dear, it was so good of you . . .’

‘No, no, I wasn't fishing for thanks. And I don't deserve any; for I'm going to desert you now, for at least an hour, to take a brisk walk. Without lots of exercise, I'm never up to the mark.’

So saying, Ambrose brought his mother some books which he had chosen for her in London, and set out on a constitutional.

It was dusk. He passed the Tweedys, and smiled to see on the blind the shadow of Mrs. Tweedy, who was gesticulating on the other side. He passed Judith's home, and wondered what strange fancy his mother had taken into her head. And walking on briskly, he came to the Common, and soon found himself in the open country.

His quick firm step showed off his well-built figure to perfection. It was in action that Ambrose was always seen at his best. In repose his dark face was somewhat stern, especially when his hair fell, as it often did, in loose black curls over his forehead. But when animated, his eyes were so bright and pleasing, and his lips so suggestive of his mother's in their winning smile, that you forgot any disagreeable first impression.

Ambrose was so busy thinking about

his various schemes that he went further than he intended; and then suddenly stopped, and looked at his watch.

‘Six o’clock!’ said he. ‘This will never do. I must race home.’

The roads were muddy; so he tucked the ends of his trowsers up, and started for home at double-time. He ran faster and faster, so much so that when he came to the edge of the Common, where the lane took a sharp turn, he was unable to check himself, and ran into somebody who was hurrying towards the open.

It was Judith Topham. She had a paper parcel in her hand, and the shock sent it flying into the mud.

Ambrose picked it up, and, as Judith stretched out her hand for it, he recognized her.

‘Miss Topham!’ he said. ‘I hardly

know how to apologise for my awkwardness. I beg a thousand pardons. I made sure the road was deserted, and didn't look where I was running to.'

'It doesn't matter a bit,' said Judith, with a pleasant smile which her companion could just note in the uncertain light. 'I wasn't paying attention either. There's really no harm done.'

'You're very indulgent,' said Ambrose, as they shook hands. 'I hope your parcel hasn't got wet?'

Judith gave a little cry of alarm; and Ambrose took the parcel again, and began pulling off the wet paper.

'How lucky I wrapped it up in two folds,' said Judith. 'Thank you, it *is* all right. It's Aunt Robby's table-cloth.'

'Aunt Robby's?' said Ambrose.

'I thought only we poor women were curious. Yes, Mrs. Robertson's; and I can

assure you, though I oughtn't to be the person to say so, that it's quite worth seeing.'

'That means it's your work,' said Ambrose. 'My curiosity is quite uncontrollable now.'

'There's no light,' said Judith. But he pointed to a lamp some yards off, and by its rays she showed him the corner of the cloth, worked in silk.

'Beautiful,' said Ambrose. 'You have reason to be proud of it. What a bold design. Rather like my mother's style.'

It was Mrs. Jackson's. But Judith held her tongue about that, and wished him good-night.

'Are you going to Mrs. Robertson's now?' said he. 'Then I must see you safely there.'

'But you were in such a hurry,' replied Judith.

‘Circumstances alter cases,’ answered Ambrose. ‘There may be other wild fellows running about the roads, for all I know. You must be protected.’ And, Judith gladly consenting, they walked on together.

‘I hope Mrs. Robertson will appreciate the present in store for her,’ said Ambrose. ‘What makes you so good-natured?’

Judith was all the more pleased because of his matter-of-fact tone, and a flush which her companion could not see rose on her cheek. She tried to say something kind in return.

‘You are busy, too, Mr. Jackson, on a larger and more important scale. I think you may have many opportunities for making others happy, and advancing a cause you think good. But isn’t the profession of politics difficult and hazardous?’

Ambrose, too, was pleased. So seldom

did any woman (except his mother) seem able to enter into his ambition. He saw that Judith differed from him in not regarding politics merely as a personal advantage ; but her few words made him feel that, unlike, as he believed, most of her sex, she had definite opinions. He therefore answered with less reserve than he could have thought possible when he had spoken of 'your country maid' to his mother that afternoon.

'Difficult and hazardous, Miss Topham ? Yes, to the waverers and the fickle-minded ; but not to the patient, the strong, and the thoughtful. Let a man find out exactly what he wants to do, let him determine that the thing shall be done, that every day shall bring him nearer . . . if it be but an inch nearer . . . to his aim : and hazard and difficulty are but empty names '

‘I quite see,’ said Judith. ‘And then you make friends, bound up in the same cause, whose affection you can rely upon!’

‘No,’ said the young politician, hastily. ‘I have no such friends. They would encumber me. I rely upon the only person of whom I can say, “He will not fail” . . . upon myself. Of course I don’t journey alone: but my fellow-travellers only give me their company because it’s their interest to do so.’

Judith gave a start, looked up with vague distrust and alarm at the dark, strong features of the speaker beside her, and unconsciously moved a step away from him. So she had made a mistake, after all. Ambrose never had existed as she had pictured him in her mind. The mistake was only to be expected; for she had seen little of him, and she had never heard of his faults from Mrs. Jackson. The mother

was too loyal to speak of her son's shortcomings to anyone, and she naturally exaggerated his virtues. Judith had hitherto considered Ambrose a generous man, whose enthusiasm was held in check by a keen intelligence. The intelligence was there ; but the enthusiasm was deplorably one-sided, and the generosity, alas ! with his own lips he had disavowed its possession. Interest the sole guide of his life ! What could be more hopeless and more dreary ? Judith positively shivered. Then she began to excuse him. Perhaps Ambrose knew the world better than she did ; perhaps in his particular path self-seeking was a necessity. No ! something within her forbade the supposition that all she had heard and read of devotion in Public Life was a mere fable ; and she said, eagerly,

‘ I altogether reject your creed, Mr. Jackson. Never will I believe that any

cause can prosper unless its promoters forget themselves to carry it through.'

Ambrose wished to explain that he did not care a straw for any cause, unless it could become a ladder for his own ambition. He wished to explain to this terribly out-spoken young lady that for him 'politics' was only a trade . . . like book-binding or boot-making . . . sweetened by the love for power and by its exercise. He thought her very quixotic to talk about causes, abstractions he cared little about. And yet, though accustomed to treat others' opinions with something like disdain, he dared not invite the censure of the young girl walking at his elbow. So he kept silence.

'You are fond of history, of course,' said Judith. 'My stock is likely to be poor and scanty, I know. But doesn't history prove your creed to be false? Aren't

there any examples of self-sacrificing brotherhoods in it? For instance, the Abolitionists?’

Ambrose tried to smile at this little display of feminine erudition; but he was non-plussed. The case, if trite, was apt. He had studied history, to be sure; and had found in it all that he had sought, and deserved to find: facts that might be useful to him in the career he had mapped out. He knew the arguments for and against the Slave Trade, and the position of parties, but had not noticed over-much the self-sacrificing spirit of which Judith spoke. He could not meet her on the higher ground she had chosen; and would not acknowledge defeat. So he glossed over his failure by saying that many personal motives were lost to history, and that, on the other hand, a great deal of false sentiment crept into its pages. A poor evasion! and he

felt that Judith detected its barrenness as she answered,

‘Granting your system to be the best in the field you have chosen, aren’t you afraid of not being able to get rid of it in every-day life, of its clinging to you, and dragging you down?’

‘Private life is quite a separate affair,’ said Ambrose; feeling that he was still losing ground, and wishing that he had run against anybody else but this provincial Miss Topham.

‘Are you sure it can be kept separate?’ persisted Judith. She was excited herself, and had no idea how far she went.

‘I never thought much of that,’ confessed Ambrose. ‘I don’t think there’s any danger.’

‘And I think there must be,’ replied Judith, more quietly, turning her eyes full upon him; ‘but please forgive me for saying so.’

As she finished speaking, they reached Mrs. Robertson's gate. Judith, who was already seriously taking herself to task for having spoken so freely, thanked him for coming so far out of his way to oblige her, but did not offer to shake hands. Ambrose was no less formal; for he was vexed with himself for having defended his theories to Judith Topham, whose existence he had not hitherto thought of importance. He was puzzled, and, when he had lost sight of her, shrugged his broad shoulders with an air of discomfort, and strode down the lane.

No wonder Ambrose was puzzled, for he knew next to nothing of women. Ever since he could remember, he had been too busy to think about them. A time would come, he never doubted, when he might look down from the high position he had won, upon such matters. Yes, beauty and love were

very good things . . . after working hours. He wondered how people could waste their time among women when there was so much else to do ; and he was punished by a want of some of the easy graces other young men had. This loss, however, was fully balanced by his ignorance of fashionable vice. He would have scorned fiercely the assertion that 'wild oats' were excusable, fashionable . . . even laudable. And to this healthy tone of mind he unquestionably owed a large share of his decision and energy. It made his bearing manly ; and his voice had the true, clear ring of a pure and fearless gentleman.

While he is hurrying home, we will follow Judith into the cheery presence of old Aunt Robby, where a surprise awaits her.

CHAPTER VI.

AT FIRST SIGHT.

MRS. ROBERTSON'S clock struck the half-hour: half-past six. Blind-man's holiday, which she observed regularly every evening, was over some time ago; and the curtains were drawn in front of the closed shutters; and the lamps were lit, and a blazing and a crackling came from the thick logs piled across the iron dragons on the hearth. A little on one side of the rug, so as not to shut the warmth out from Aunt Robby in her easy chair, stood a tall man of about forty-five. He had a long chestnut beard, chestnut hair just turning

grey, and, in spite of every care to hide the truth, somewhat thin on the crown. He was dressed rather smartly, especially for Baybridge, as if he preferred to pass for thirty, and had no desire to be mistaken for a married man. He was, in truth, a bachelor, named William Sutton; and he had come on a visit to Mrs. Robertson, at the Elms.

Will Sutton was an orphan, and had been a ward in Chancery. When he became his own master, he plunged headlong, first into pleasure, then into extravagance, and then into riotous living. This lasted for a few golden years. Then trouble and ill-health came on wings, while at a foot's pace followed repentance.

There is perhaps no greater martyrdom on earth, than to start from the dream of lawless pleasure . . . say at thirty-five . . . and to find the heart empty and callous,

and that most precious gift, health, vilely cast away. Repair is possible in other things. Will, by dint of rigid economy (and some timber-felling), saved the estate of his fathers. But the glow, the ardour, the rejoicing in one's strength . . . could these return ?

Friends went, too, as they so often will ; for a sick man is out of sight, and . . . the proverb holds good. The reformed spendthrift sought consolation, not altogether in vain, from books and from art ; and strength from milder climates. Years passed. The fruits of restraint ripened ; health returned. But Will Sutton had no ties. Clever, amiable, and affectionate, he was almost alone in the world, without an aim, feeling, except on rare occasions when old flames would burst forth, that his day had gone, that his sun had set in clouds.

He was one of the 'unclassed;' too numerous among us.

'Will, I hope you are comfortable, and have everything you want,' said his hostess. 'I shall expect you to stay a long time; because I must learn to be as fond of you as I was of your father. He knew how to pay a compliment; no one danced the minuet like your father. What a handsome lad he was, well, well-a-day! Do you hear, Will, I shall expect you to stay a very long time.'

'You quite spoil me, Aunt Robby, and you'll never get rid of me,' said Will.

'I shall make some one else spoil you,' was the answer. For the kindly gentlewoman was not tired of match-making, even after the practice of nearly half-a-century.

'Too late! Aunt Robby,' murmured Will Sutton, as, perhaps, chances he had

recklessly tossed aside rose in his memory. The words gave the key-note of his existence. He had always been too late.

‘Tut, tut, a good-looking man in the prime of life,’ piped Aunt Robby. ‘I’ll not listen to such croaking. Fiddlesticks, Will. Now I’ve got you at the Elms, I shall show you to all the young ladies in Bay-bridge. Oh, I shall. I have a tea-party to-morrow on purpose. The Tophams will be here. You’ve not forgotten Judith and Annie, Will?’

‘Forgotten my old friends? I should think not,’ said Mr. Sutton. ‘What a time it is since we’ve met. They were mere slips of children, then; fresh and joyous creatures, that used to play me a thousand tricks. Judith has grown handsome, I daresay?’

‘You shall judge for yourself,’ exclaimed the old lady, hearing the hall-door bell ring.

‘That’s Judith; I forgot (in the excitement of your coming, Will) that she hadn’t been here to-day. She seldom lets a day pass without a visit to old Aunt Robby, and so that must be Judith. No, no, she wouldn’t disappoint the old woman. Quick, quick, Will! hide behind that screen. Can I look as if you weren’t there, I wonder.’

Sutton smiled at her garrulous delight, and went into hiding as she bade him. Not a moment too soon; for in ran Judith exclaiming,

‘Here I am, Aunt Robby.’

Mrs. Robertson had no relations in the world; but in Baybridge she was everywhere known as ‘Aunt’ Robby, a title she deserved by the affectionate interest she took in everybody’s welfare.

‘Here I am,’ said Judith, ‘after all sorts of adventures.’ And, holding the tablecloth behind her back, she added, ‘I’ve a

surprise for you, Aunt Robby. Guess?’

‘A surprise!’ tittered the venerable dame, chuckling at the thought of the bearded man so cunningly hid behind the screen, ‘a surprise, have you? He, he! so have I, Jue. We’ll see who’s the best hand at surprises.’

‘Mine,’ said Judith, ‘is this table-cloth for your birthday; there it is, ready for your tea-party to-morrow.’

And she unpacked her treasure, and let the gay border fall invitingly over the edge of the table.

‘Oh, the dear, thoughtful child,’ said Aunt Robby. ‘Let me see. Roses and forget-me-nots! Oh, dear, oh, dear. My old favourites too. None of the new-fangled things that don’t mean anything. Kiss me, child, for the beau-ti-ful present. Where are my spectacles? Now! Beau-ti-ful, Judith! How evenly you’ve work-

ed it, pet. With my glasses, I thank goodness my sight's as clear as ever it was, though I'm getting an old woman now. My birthday! ah, Jue, I remember *your* first birthday; what a fine baby you were, and the gentlest of them all, to be sure.'

Aunt Robby was so taken up with the birthday present that she forgot all about Will Sutton. The old dame had a lively imagination (which was to play havoc later on), and she was shrewd enough when she could bring her mind to bear upon any one matter. The time had long gone by when she could think (as one says) of two things at once. She was now thinking that the table-cloth must have cost much more than Judith could afford, and wondering how, without offence, she could prevent the girl from being a loser by the generosity. So Will Sutton was altogether forgotten, and there is no saying

how long he must have stayed where he was, but for Judith's question,

‘Now, Aunt Robby, what surprise have *you?*’

‘Gracious!’ said the ancient lady, ‘I had forgotten all about him. Well, well, I’m getting to be an old woman now. Jue, my child, just pull the screen a little forward.’

Judith obeyed. The bearded man came forth with outstretched hand.

‘Don’t you recognise me, Judith?’ he asked.

Miss Topham was rather startled at this sudden apparition. She raised her eyes gravely, and shook her head. Evidently she had no idea who he was.

‘Not know Will Sutton?’ cried Aunt Robby, who had expected things would take quite a different turn.

‘Will!’ exclaimed Judith. ‘Of course

it is. Please forgive me,' she went on, taking his hand, 'but you are so . . . I mean it is so long ago, we are both so changed.'

'Are you going only to shake hands? After thirteen years' separation! Kiss her at once, Will,' said Mrs. Robertson.

It would be hard to say who looked the most embarrassed, the elderly man with his grave air, or the blushing girl he had formerly known so well. But Judith had no nonsense about her; Will was a very old friend, and Aunt Robby would never let them off. So she held her cheek to Will, and he touched it reverently with his lips. The mistress of the Elms laughed, well pleased, and made them sit down, one on each side of her easy-chair.

'Where have you been all this time; and why have you so seldom written?' asked Judith.

‘I ought to have written more often,’ he answered, ‘you were all often in my thoughts. I’ve been a great deal abroad ; for my home’s the loneliest place for me without kith or kin. In fact, I’ve only just come from Dresden. I stayed a week at Radalls to see that everything was in order, and then came to Aunt Robby’s.’

‘After staying away from the Elms for five long years,’ complained old Mrs. Robertson.

‘And we have been four years at Bay-bridge,’ said Judith ; ‘how time flies ! And now, Will, you must tell me all about Highcroft.’

Highcroft was the country-house where Judith had been born and brought up. It has been already mentioned that her one disappointment, of which Highcroft had been the scene, was forgotten. Nothing but sweet memories clung to those haunts of her childhood. Nothing of the

worry and anxiety that were now her daily lot had reached her in those sunny days. She and Annie had wandered arm-in-arm along the river bank, listened with awe to the dull boom of the Salmon Leap, and stopped for the cool spray to beat on their cheeks and hair. Little Annie had gone to sleep in her lap in the silence of the woods. The children knew every green lane, every sparkling brook, every favoured spot for the primrose and violet. Judith's thoughts went a long way back to when Will himself was brilliant and gay, and patronisingly gracious to a small mite like her, and she repeated :

‘Tell me all about Highcroft, Will.’

He first asked after her parents and her sister, and then answered,

‘Highcroft is sadly changed, Judith. In the first place . . . dare I tell you? . . . they have slain Goliath.’

Goliath was the name given to a giant beech, the pride of Highcroft, which had stood between the study windows and the river, at the foot of the hill.

‘The wretches!’ exclaimed Judith.

‘Perhaps nothing better could be expected from the new owner,’ said Will, who had some pride of birth. ‘He was “in tallow,” I believe. He has pulled down the old boat-house, too, and built another with a spire and a gilt weather-cock.’

Aunt Robby shook her head at this enumeration of the tallow-merchant’s enormities. Judith said, impatiently,

‘Stop, Will. I had a longing to see Highcroft once again, but I’m cured now. For the future I shall be content in quiet Baybridge.’

‘Is it so quiet?’ said Will, smiling. ‘You spoke of all sorts of adventures on your way to the Elms this evening.’

‘So she did,’ cried Aunt Robby, ‘so she did. She is beginning to have secrets, Will, you see. We shall have her marrying one of these days.’

Judith blushed; but she parried the old lady’s attack by saying, merrily,

‘I shall marry no one but Will.’

To be told this by an uncommonly pretty woman ought to be pleasant enough. Not always. Mr. William Sutton by no means relished Judith’s innocent sally, because it seemed to imply that he was so much her senior that the jest could be made without any hazard or possibility of misunderstanding. His head drooped. —Judith, after a great pretence of mystery to amuse Aunt Robby, described her chance meeting with Ambrose Jackson.

‘Jackson,’ said the old lady, ‘Ambrose Jackson; so you met him? I did too, Judith. He’s coming to see me.’

‘I thought you didn’t like him,’ said Judith. For Mrs. Robertson, usually so kind, had spoken severely about Ambrose in her hearing.

‘No more I did, Jue,’ replied Aunt Robby, ‘but I’ve asked him to come now. He’s attentive to his mother, I see, and perhaps I have done him a wrong. A man may have faults, but, if you can get at his heart at all, there’s hope, my dear. Mr. Jackson will be civil enough to me, maybe.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he will,’ said Judith.

‘I mean, child, he knows I can be of use to him. Ho, ho, I see what he’ll want by-and-by.’

‘A wife?’ suggested Will, with a smile.

‘You mustn’t make fun of an old woman, sir,’ said Aunt Robby. ‘A wife! No. Mr. Jackson doesn’t care about women, I promise you.’

Mrs. Robertson evidently had an inkling

of Ambrose's intention to contest Bay-bridge, and indeed the news was generally known next day. While the old lady's friends were coaxing her to tell what Ambrose would want, it struck seven. Up jumped Judith.

'I must be off or I shall be late for dinner, and father will be vexed,' said she. 'Good-night, Aunt Robby.'

'Must you go, child? Very well; Will shall see you home.'

Will went for his hat. The friends started.

Judith was in great spirits. She took her companion's arm, and, noticing that he was rather solemn, asked him many questions about himself, and his travels, and his home in Surrey . . . till she chased away his gloom. Of his past life she knew much, and pitied him; and so her tone was unusually cordial.

‘I wish I could ask you to come in,’ she said, as they reached her home. ‘It seems unkind not to do so, but father . . .’

Judith stopped short. It was so hard to explain, and yet it had so often to be acknowledged, how seldom her father cared for anybody’s convenience but his own. Her companion understood, and put her at her ease by saying,

‘Who could think of taking you by storm at this hour of the night, Judith? Not I. But before you go I have a favour to ask.’

‘Yes, Will, anything.’

‘We are such old friends,’ he began. ‘You mustn’t be angry, but Aunt Robby has told me something of your father’s misfortunes. Don’t turn away like that, Judith. I know what poverty is. If I can ever be of use. There, there, old friend, we understand each other. You’re not going to be offended.’

‘Offended? No, Will; do you think kindness is so plentiful that I can afford to throw it away?’

‘And, if you are in need, you promise?’

‘I promise to ask for your help, and will love you for it.’

In another moment Will was standing alone in the dark.

He was grieved by Judith’s artless words. They made him look, with a shudder, down the chasm that severed him, not only from her, but from all that was still young and beautiful. To see Judith, whom he had parted from in short frock and crimson sash, now transformed into a woman, forced him to realize more vividly than he had yet done how these years, while moulding her grace and beauty, had left their sterner mark upon him . . . with his wasted life, and unsatisfied hungering after happiness. Judith had not recognised him, and he dared not think

day

that strange. He had grown a beard, his hair had turned grey, his complexion had lost its bloom; his forehead was lined, not honourably with thought, but with care. If salutary, what more painful than to look back like this, and dimly see, in blurred outlines, a picture of what might have been. Will's heart ached. He bitterly cursed the sins of his youth. Some bright young fellow would come one morning and carry off Judith; he was once such an one. As Will walked back to the Elms, his head sank lower and lower on his breast. Judith's last words rang in his ears, 'I will love you for it.' He felt that his life was changed.

CHAPTER VII.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

It was not known for a certainty how Nicholas Tucker had raked a fortune together. He had followed so many occupations in so many parts of the world that it was difficult to class him. Baybridge, after many years, had given up the attempt, and took him as he was. And he was unquestionably a wealthy man, though he chose to live simply, in spite of the repeated protests of his two middle-aged daughters, Elizabeth and Clementina.

Nicholas was a tall, thin old man. He wore a beard as long as Will Sutton's, and

nearly white. His head was smooth and shining to a degree. His face was weather-stained, and disfigured by scars, creases, and wrinkles on the loose, hanging skin, his half-open eyes, which saw everything, being darkened by shaggy eyebrows. He wore good clothes, but they hung all awry on his shrunken limbs. Not a prepossessing appearance by any means.

He had been almost everywhere, and had done almost everything. He had tried his hand at sheep-farming and gold-digging. He had tried the wine trade at the Cape. Versatile Nicholas had tried finance too; he had promoted companies on both sides of the water, with varying success. Eventually, it was from the Brazils that he returned with his pile. Here he was, the rough, ill-mannered fellow, settled down into respectability with his ponderous wealth, and with his Spartan tastes.

Mr. Tucker never entertained ; but he was charitably disposed (or it suited him to appear so) and had built some schools and a church, and in other ways made use of his opportunities. Though not a general favourite, he got on pretty well with his neighbours. His chief failing in their eyes was an incurable habit of asking questions, he must know everybody else's affairs, even to the most trifling details. But Nicholas could be good-natured, and, as on rare occasions he showed feeling, he passed for a rough diamond. He was pitied, besides, for being the father of the Misses Tucker. It was supposed that no worldly prosperity could prove a set-off against this misfortune. Why did not he give the spinsters a heavy nugget a-piece, and see the last of their sour, spiteful faces ?

Elizabeth and Clementina Tucker knew perfectly well why, and the knowledge

caused their cup of bitterness to run over. These ladies, answering to Ambrose Jackson's description of most of the women in Baybridge, had been born in some outlandish place, and sent home for their education. They grew up, and nothing was heard of their father, but he had given each of them five thousand pounds that nobody else could lay a finger on. One happy day came news of Nicholas Tucker's prosperous return. The dear girls hurried to Plymouth with open arms. But they were met by a shabbily-dressed man imploring charity. Miss Tucker wondered what her father 'had been about.' He murmured the words 'unfortunate speculation.' Miss Tucker believed in Consols, and went home. Her sister followed; but relented so far as to send a cheque for ten pounds, hoping that her 'dear Papa would retrieve his losses, and come back to his loving child Clementina.'

Mr. Tucker then threw off the mask, and behold, a Dives ! Imagine the dismay and the repentance of his affectionate daughters !

A reconciliation took place more easily than they could have hoped ; but it was totally unattended with profit to themselves. The old man's revenge was cruel. Fabulous wealth, and nothing but a dull life in Baybridge ! Prospects held out Tantalus-like, and never grasped ! Interested suitors, and not a single lover ! Their father still transacted a great deal of business, by correspondence and by frequent visits to London ; but he actually suspected his children, and deprived them of any opportunity of becoming acquainted with his affairs. It was hard to bear, and sometimes they railed even at him.

A rapid sketch has been given of this respectable family, because, when Ambrose

Jackson reached home after his unexpected walk with Judith Topham, he heard, to his infinite disgust, the disagreeable voices of Miss Tucker and her sister in full concert. Ambrose knew what his mother must be putting up with, and entering, found Nicholas and his two daughters in possession.

Mrs. Jackson welcomed her son with a look that said, 'It isn't my fault they're here.' And Ambrose smiled as though he would answer, 'A bad lot, but I'll do my best to be civil.'

This would be difficult; for between Ambrose and the Misses Tucker there was no love lost. They had spread their nets for him in vain. They had thrown out hints of the convenience of a large dower to an ambitious man. Of course each had acted without the connivance of the other, and with the greatest delicacy. But, when

Ambrose had taken hardly any pains to veil his contempt, a partial confession took place between Elizabeth and Clementina, and they agreed to hate Ambrose with a mortal hatred, and to find out his vulnerable point, and to wound him there. They smiled on him now, and Miss Tucker exclaimed,

‘I’m afraid you find us here at a very unseasonable hour, Mr. Jackson?’

Mr. Jackson said ‘Not at all,’ and tried to look as if he meant it.

‘I’m sure we feel like intruders,’ said Miss Clementina, who often acted as echo to her sister.

‘We are very pleased to see you all,’ said Mrs. Jackson, rather sharply, for she had been obliged to say the same thing several times already.

‘This is how we come to be here, Mr. Jackson,’ continued Miss Tucker. ‘We

were passing the house without a thought of venturing in, when dearest Clementina saw . . . for the blind had not been pulled down . . . Mrs. Jackson sitting over the fire, leaning her head upon her hand. She looked so lonely that we felt we must go in; didn't we, Clem?'

'Yes, Mrs. Jackson looked so lonely,' said the echo.

'How unfortunate that your son's business should take him so often from you, Mrs. Jackson,' said Miss Tucker.

'I am never lonely,' protested Mrs. Jackson. 'Ambrose offered to give up politics and to settle down into country life to be near me. I was proud to receive the offer, but can you suppose I would allow the sacrifice? No.'

Ambrose's heart smote him when he remembered how feebly the sacrifice had been insisted on, and he bent forward and

kissed her forehead. He saw Miss Tucker sneer, but he would have done so in the presence of a dozen Miss Tuckers.

Nicholas prevented any further remarks from his daughters for the present by rapping on the floor with his stick, a signal they dared not disobey.

‘Where have you come from, Mr. Jackson?’ said he.

‘I’ve been for a constitutional,’ said Ambrose, determining to answer every question, as the shortest way of escape.

‘Which road did you take?’

‘The road to the Common.’

‘And how far did you get?’

‘To the group of pines on the left.’

‘Roads empty? Did you meet anyone?’

Ambrose paused. There was no particular reason to prevent him from saying that he had met Judith Topham. But he did not want to throw her name down for

these hawks to peck at. He said that he had met somebody, and tried to turn the conversation. He ought to have known Mr. Tucker better.

‘Who was it you met?’ persisted that gentleman.

‘Miss Topham,’ said Ambrose.

‘Indeed!’ said Miss Tucker.

‘Indeed!’ said Miss Clementina.

‘Had a talk with her, eh?’ was Mr. Tucker’s next inquiry.

‘Yes,’ said Ambrose, not knowing whether to laugh or to be angry.

‘And a walk?’ said Mr. Tucker.

‘Miss Topham was going to Mrs. Robertson’s,’ said Ambrose. ‘I met her at the cross-roads and accompanied her as far as the Elms. And now you know all about that important occurrence.’

Nicholas was going to ask what the subject of their conversation had been, but the

expression on Ambrose's face checked even him, and he kept silence. Not so his daughters . . . while there was a young and pretty woman for their tongues to pull to pieces. Their attack on poor Judith was commenced in a manner so masterly as to suggest great experience in similar operations.

‘Some people,’ said Elizabeth, smiling, ‘find fault with Miss Topham's manners, and call them provincial’ (here Ambrose winced slightly), ‘but for my part I think Judith a sweet-mannered girl, and very refined for one in her circumstances of life. Of course her surroundings must be taken into consideration. One has no right to expect too much. She passes muster very well in a country drawing-room.’

‘I think Miss Topham would be welcome anywhere,’ interposed Mrs. Jackson.

‘Of course she would,’ said Clementina.

‘I think she’s very attractive, and when I heard somebody say the other afternoon that her looks were going, I contradicted him immediately. Everybody may not admire her so much as I do, but, still, no one can call Judith Topham common-looking.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Ambrose, with emphasis.

‘I even think she has quite a distinguished air; but then Judith’s a great favourite with me. I always say, what a pity she should be so poor.’

‘Wretchedly poor, I’m afraid,’ said Miss Tucker, ‘perhaps that accounts for her pride. Not that I blame her on that account: pride is sometimes very becoming in people who have little else.’

‘I often think you’re quite proud yourself, Lizzie,’ said Nicholas. ‘You’re not good-looking, girls, either of you; but you’re good-natured or nothing. Been

painting anything lately, Mrs. Jackson ?'

And a rigorous cross-examination followed ; and Mrs. Jackson had to prevaricate sadly to keep her secret from Ambrose about the big picture on which she was engaged.

It was half-past seven by this time, and the parlour-maid, who had kept in the background in hopes that the unwelcome visitors would take their departure, felt herself obliged to announce that supper was ready.

Nicholas did not stir. But the Misses Tucker rose, and exclaimed in chorus, ' Could it be so late, how very thoughtless of them ; but the time had passed so agreeably.' Mrs. Jackson had no choice but to regret not being able to ask them to stay, as she and her son never dined late, but contented themselves with supper.

' Anything will do for us,' said Nicholas,

‘You’re not particular, are you, girls? We don’t have many delicacies at home, Mrs. Jackson.’

‘Oh, dear no,’ said Clementina, ‘papa is quite an anchorite.’

Mrs. Jackson hoped they would stay . . . at least she said so.

‘If you’re sure we’re not putting you to any inconvenience,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Please, don’t let us be in the way,’ said Clementina. ‘Elizabeth dearest, perhaps Mrs. Jackson would rather not.’

‘As Mrs. Jackson has been so kind as to ask us, Clem, perhaps——’

‘Please say no more about it,’ said Mrs. Jackson. ‘You are heartily welcome.’

And so they stayed; and the Misses Tucker found fault with everything that was set before them. Notwithstanding, they showed excellent appetites, and consequently talked less. Their father began

to cross-examine Ambrose about his occupation and prospects.

Ambrose could be firm enough when he pleased; and on these points proved quite a match for Nicholas. But he had no objection to ventilate some of his theories on the science of life, and he met with an unexpected and powerful rebuke from his listener.

‘ It won’t do, Jackson, it won’t do. Now look ’ee. I’m an old flint maybe, but I’d like to do you a good turn. Listen to this story. I had a pal once, about your age, plenty of brains, and as honest as you are now. Well, he started in life with this motto—“Take care of Number One.” Well, he took care of Number One. He had many promising schemes afoot, and followed them up with industry and intelligence no end; but somehow, just when he should have grasped the prize, another man came,

saying, "It's mine. I've been taking care of Number One as well." However, he didn't lose heart, and one day (it was on the other side of the water) he turned up trumps. That was the beginning of a fortune. At last, when he had heaped up a fairish pile, he said, "I've got money, and now I want love." As he'd always been taking care of Number One, and neglecting all the other numbers, he had no right to ask for love: he bought it. He married. The woman got all she could out of him, and went off with a younger and handsomer man: she had taken care of Number One. But she left him two children, and he determined they shouldn't go the same road, so he sent them home to be brought up fitly. Then he got into trouble and was detained for some years; but he kept his money, and the moment he was set at liberty hastened to England. He put his

children to the test. *They* loved Number One; it was in the very blood. My pal had wealth then, but no love; success, but no happiness. And be sure, Jackson, the same fate, in some form or other, is in keeping for you or anyone else who thinks only of Number One.'

Nicholas half rose from his seat, and spoke with more feeling than could be expected from such a cynical old man. His daughters trembled, knowing the truth of his story. Ambrose was struck, but not convinced.

Mrs. Jackson at last got rid of the trio, after having had to assure Elizabeth several times that the visit was welcome and opportune.

'Ambrose,' she said, 'I'm rather sorry you told them that you had met Judith Topham.'

'How could I help it, mother? Is it

treason to meet a young lady in Baybridge?’

‘Those women will say anything,’ answered Mrs. Jackson, nervously.

‘What does it matter what they say?’ replied the independent Ambrose.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘HANG JUMPER!’

CHRISTOPHER PARRY was, we have heard, the laziest and slowest of men, and so there is a propriety in his being the last person of note, belonging to society at Baybridge, whose acquaintance is yet to be made. Everybody knew Cris; everybody took him into confidence, even Ambrose, but then, to be sure, they had been at the same school together. Cris, with his lanky figure, and his languid manners, hardly did anything else but read the papers, pay visits, and listen to gossip, and drawl out a word now and then . . . and dress.

Strictly speaking, though a man can exist without an aim, he must have something to give a centre to his daily life. Will Sutton, for example, had no aim, but his thoughts grouped themselves morbidly around one poignant regret. Cris had no aim either, and as the harmless fellow had nothing very serious to repent of, and rivalled Mr. Topham in offering the cold shoulder to responsibility and care, he had leisure to bestow his almost undivided attention on the study of personal adornment, a process which, with the assistance of Lloyd his valet, he had elevated to the dignity of a fine art. He dressed well, not so much to attract notice (for who was there in Baybridge?) as to feel that he *was* well-dressed. A well-dressed man, he opined, was his own reward. Lloyd, who had perquisites whenever the fashion changed, and who contrived that the

fashion should change pretty often, had adopted precisely the same views.

Cris, who was a faithful patron of the Baybridge Club, where he betted on rubbers that he was too indolent to play, seldom went to bed before the small hours. His instructions to Lloyd were to look in at nine in the morning, with a cup of chocolate, and to read aloud the summary of news and the fashionable marriages from the *Morning Post*, during which time the chocolate imparted strength for the labours of the toilette. Some minutes before ten, wrapped up in his Turkish dressing-gown, he would surrender his chin to his valet, and consider that the duties of the day had fairly begun with the first lather of the scented cream.

On the day following the Tuckers' visit to Mrs. Jackson, Lloyd had safely brought his master to an advanced stage, having

parted the golden perfumed hair with the necessary exactness. He now paused a moment, and still with uplifted comb, as if to show that he was not forgetting his office, hazarded this remark,

‘If you please, sir, pointed toes is agen going out.’

This may be translated to mean that Cris, if he meant to be fashionable, must have new shoes; and that Lloyd, unless his interests were to suffer neglect, must have the old ones.

‘Very well—I shan’t have to be measured.’

‘Oh, no occasion, sir.’ And the comb was at work again.

At about eleven Cris was nearly ready for his morning walk; he was helped into his great-coat; gloves, hat, and walking-stick were respectfully handed; and Lloyd delivered himself of the usual formula:

‘Anything more for the present, sir?’

‘Yes.—The cheroots.’

The obsequious attendant brought one upon a plate.

‘The box,’ said his master. And the box was brought and its contents examined with unusual interest, so it seemed to Lloyd, with his guilty conscience.

‘These cheroots are choice—and rare,’ said Mr. Parry; adding, ‘I think it well to remind you, that I can smoke the rest myself, without inconvenience.’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t presume, sir——’

‘Don’t lie, Lloyd. Lying bores me. You have smoked some of these. I expect you to pilfer. But if you will confine your operations to any articles of clothing I am not likely, in your opinion, to miss; to any expensive trifles that strike your fancy; or, possibly, in moderation, to any loose coin lying about—I shall be obliged. Don’t

touch my cigars again. Understand? That will be all now.'

Mr. Lloyd retired with some confusion.

'Confound that 'ere scoffing way of his,' he muttered. 'I can't abear it; makes me think somehow he ain't the fool I take him for. Expects me to pilfer! Fancy addressin' in that style a gentleman of my standin' and morals. Dash it, if he hasn't made me feel almost ashamed of myself; go on at this rate, and I should lose all my self-respect in a fortnight. Just for the sake of a weed or two!'

Whenever Cris Parry glanced in the long pier-glass at his carefully-arrayed figure and his pleasant face, he thought of marriage. The thought came naturally, for, though he liked the freedom of a bachelor's life now, he had no intention of always living in single blessedness. An old bachelor, crabbed, gouty, and home-

less, was his pet aversion. Surely the true wisdom was to remain single as long as one dared, and then, with the first symptom of coming age, to marry.

Cris was in love. Sweet, winning Annie Topham had crept snugly into a corner of the indolent but kindly heart. He felt almost sure that she would never ‘bore a fellow’ and more than once he had been on the brink of a proposal. But he had shrunk back from the responsibility of the new relation, and from its risks. Suppose, like James Tweedy, he should come to own five such awful children, with their nurses, squalls, accidents, and racket. The bare idea of this possibility was more than enough to make Cris carry that spirit of procrastination which ruled all his other doings into the matter of courtship.

‘Time enough when we both get older,’ he would say.

But this morning, while giving a last touch to his glossy hair, he saw, or imagined he saw, something that filled him with direst alarm.

‘Lloyd,’ he cried, ‘Lloyd.’

‘Sir,’ answered that functionary, appearing with the magical speed which was one of his most valuable qualities.

Cris had partly recovered from the shock, and he said, almost calmly, as he sat down.

‘Lloyd, just look, will you. I almost fancied—ah!—turning grey.’

Lloyd obeyed; examined the curling, golden locks with the air of a connoisseur, and delivered his verdict.

‘Just a leetle grey—might he recommend a preparation—not a dye—now in general use among the ’igh nobility, including his late master, Lord George Rolfe?’

Cris assented, and then strolled out of

the house. The road was frozen hard. The sunbeams danced on the frost in the hedges. The air was keen and delightful. Cris felt his spirits rise.

‘I’ll put it off no longer,’ was his reflection. ‘If I got grey, gad! she might refuse me. Little coax! I’ll ask her this very day.’

And, having thus valiantly made up his mind, (a thing that seldom happened to Cris, and might even now prove delusive), he directed his steps to Annie’s home. He had not gone far before he met a diminutive man muffled up to the chin, looking very cross. Cris extended a finger.

‘How do, Tweedy? Bored?’

‘Bored!’ cried Mrs. Tweedy’s husband, thrusting his clenched fist into the palm of his other hand, ‘I’m a desperate man.’

Cris remembered that great soother tobacco, and held out his cigar-case; hooked his arm in his friend’s, and said:

‘Come my way. Tell me all about it.’

‘It’s a gloomy subject,’ replied James Tweedy. ‘Ah, Parry, you young fellows never know when you’re well off. You’re single, listen to experience; take my advice, never marry.’

Cris kept silence, thinking all the time of the question he was going to ask Annie.

‘Because,’ continued the other, ‘the moment your wife walks in at the door, peace, comfort, freedom fly out at the window.’

A puff of smoke, followed by a long-drawn ‘Ah!’ was the protest of Christopher Parry against this abominable heresy.

‘You can’t believe me,’ said Harry, ‘you haven’t made the experiment. Before I married I was comfortable. I could choose my own hours, friends, occupations, amusement. I could go to the

club when I liked, and come back when I liked.’

‘Of course,’ drawled Cris, ‘I should be very fond of my wife and that, but I should have my own way, you know.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ retorted Tweedy. ‘Not if you were ever so amiable. Take my case, for example. Now, I’m not a very severe man.’

‘Not very,’ was the answer, with the faintest possible smile.

‘I don’t expect much—luckily. From morning (five o’clock, when the baby awakes) till night, when the whole crew are being washed . . . never was so much soap-ing with so little to show for it . . . my house is a terrific Tower of Babel. If we all spoke different languages the confusion couldn’t be more deplorable. I never know what time breakfast is, or what time luncheon is, or what time anything else is. If I

light a pipe in my study (which belongs to everybody else) down comes a maid, "Please, sir, missus says *would* you mind," and out goes the pipe! Or, if I slip into into the garden, my wife calls, "James, James, *where* are you! Would you mind listening at the foot of the staircase in case baby cries?" Oh, it's no laughing matter, Parry. It's tragedy!

Cris was on the point of saying that perhaps his friend was rather soft, but did not like to hurt his feelings. So he turned to the bright side of the picture, saying,

'One must be bored sometimes, Tweedy. But, then, if you love your wife . . . now, really love her . . . and she loves you?'

James Tweedy's face grew dark, and he thrust his hands far down into his pockets.

'If she *does* love you,' he said. 'Cris, you're a good chap, and I'll speak to you

of what I wouldn’t breathe to another mortal. Captain Handcock——’

‘That idiot,’ interrupted Mr. Parry, ‘took no notice of his partner’s Blue Peter last night, and I betted a fiver on his hand—nothing but trumps.’

‘That swaggering cad,’ said Tweedy, with increasing earnestness, ‘is perpetually at my house, dancing attendance on my wife. I stood it for a long time, and then I spoke to her——’

‘Wrong,’ said Cris, knocking the ash off his cheroot. ‘Do it again, and the captain will be with her all day.’

Cris was right; Mrs. Tweedy’s apparent partiality for Captain Handcock had partly sprung from her husband’s opposition. She did not care a straw for Captain Handcock, but he was a good listener, and then Mrs. Tweedy had a woman’s liking for homage, without reference to the person by whom it was offered.

‘But what is to be done?’ insisted James Tweedy.

‘Say nothing, see nothing. Be civil. Your wife will drop him sooner than you think.’

‘And if’ . . . the little man’s voice trembled . . . ‘there should be anything serious?’

‘Come, come,’ said Cris.

‘I am putting a case,’ said Tweedy, quite angrily.

Cris flushed.

‘I should buy a stout ash-plant, Tweedy. But there’ll be no occasion. And our conversation goes no further.’

‘I knew that,’ said Tweedy, grasping his hand warmly.

‘Off?’ asked Cris. ‘Come with me to the Tophams.’

For Annie’s lover was beginning to feel nervous, and would have been thankful even for Tweedy’s company.

‘No, thank’ee,’ answered James, ‘I fancy my wife has gone there—with the children. I have enough of them at Llewelyn House.’

‘Heartless parent,’ laughed Cris.

‘Happy bachelor,’ was the reply.

Cris, as he walked on alone, wondered whether, after all, he was going to do a wise thing.

‘I’ll talk to Annie first,’ said he, ‘and find out her views of marriage in general, ask her what she thinks about regular hours, smoking indoors, clubs, and that sort of thing. Yes, I’ll do nothing rash.’

When he reached his destination, he could at first find nobody. Mr. Topham had insisted upon taking Judith out with him, though she would much sooner have stayed with her mother, to help in the housekeeper’s room. Mrs. Tweedy was with Mrs. Topham. Annie was nowhere to be seen. At last, however, Cris heard

laughter issuing from the dining-room, and cautiously peeped in.

Nora, Dora, and Augusta Tweedy were trying to stand on their heads on the seat of Mr. Topham's favourite arm-chair. The youngest Tweedy but one, whom her father, prone to slenderest witticisms, called 'the penultimate,' was nestling in Annie's lap. Annie had on her fur-edged cloak and a boa round her neck, and was evidently just going out.

On the hearth, unconscious of what fate had in store for him, slumbered the dachshünd Jumper.

Cris's golden head vanished like lightning.

'Come in, Mr. Parry,' called Annie. 'Don't be frightened.'

'Frightened, Miss Annie, not by *you*,' said Cris, shaking hands, and looking into the girl's happy face.

‘Mr. Pa-wy,’ said Dora, ‘do you like children—lots of us, I mean?’

Cris saw Annie’s eyes fixed roguishly on him, and answered that he did like children in moderation, if they were good and did not tell fibs.

‘What’s mod-er-wation mean?’ piped Augusta, always in search of information.

‘Silly,’ retorted the elder sister, ‘it means plenty, lots. I say, Annie, why did you get quite red when Mr. Parry came in.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Cris to Annie, ‘as you’ve got your things on, shall we . . . er . . . take . . . er . . . turn in the garden?’

‘Do let’s—’ chorussed the infant tribe.

‘No, you children must stay here. You must promise to be very good,’ said Annie.

‘I shall leave you under Nora’s care.—Yes, Mr. Parry, I should like to very much; it’s a lovely morning.’

‘Why do you say very much?’ asked Dora. ‘D’you mean very, very much, ever so much?’

‘Mr. Parry is my guest, and I must amuse him,’ said blushing Annie.

‘I know what’d amuse him,’ said Dora.

‘What?’ chorussed her sisters.

‘Kiss him—in mod-er-wation,’ said Dora.

‘That means plenty, lots,’ insisted Nora, proud of her powers of definition.

‘Miss Annie,’ said Cris, ‘there’s nothing left for us but a masterly retreat.’

‘What’s ree-tweat mean?’ inquired Augusta; but her seniors were already out of hearing.

‘I say, you girls,’ said Nora, who ought to have set a better example, ‘I can’t, because I’ve got to hold Willy (the penultimate’s name was Wilhelmina), but you tease Jumper.’

This motion, being so put, was carried

by acclamation, and preparations were made for a grand assault on the unsuspecting victim.

Annie, as she led the way down the gravel walk, could not help feeling fluttered; her heart would go pit-a-pat. There was nothing unusual in Cris suggesting that they should take a turn in the garden, they had often walked together up and down the terraces. But in her companion's voice, as he made the request, there had been eagerness. Did this eagerness, so unlike him, come merely from his wish to escape from the chattering children, or had he really something important to say to Annie, something that she dearly wished to hear? She glanced at him and saw a languid but good-natured smile on his lips.

‘Dreadful children!’ said Annie.

‘All children aren't like that,’ said Cris.

‘Not if they’re properly brought up, in a regular home, and so on.’

‘I wonder how Mrs. Tweedy can neglect them so ; yet no, she doesn’t neglect them, she manages badly,’ said Annie.

‘Miss Annie,’ said Cris, ‘don’t you think now that it’s a woman’s duty to prevent the children from . . . er . . . in fact . . . boring her husband by . . . er . . . sprawling about the place all day long?’

This was a leading question, judiciously framed, and drawled out by the young man with the most nonchalant air. Annie was not clever like Judith, but she was sharp and wide-awake. She understood, and, like the sly puss she was, began to play to the gallery.

‘There ought to be fixed hours,’ she said, ‘for the children to be dressed and taken out, the mother ought to have all the worry and hurry, and the father should

see them neat and clean in the evening; perhaps before he goes to his club.’

Cris laughed,

‘I thought all women hated clubs, Miss Annie?’

‘Dear no,’ said the girl, opening her large eyes in pretty wonder. ‘Hate clubs! Of course, if people stayed out ever so late——’

‘Occasionally?’ said Cris.

‘Now and then, say twice a week, I shouldn’t mind,’ said Annie, unconsciously betraying what was in her thoughts.

Cris ‘hemmed’ and ‘hawed,’ and exclaimed :

‘Miss Annie!’

The moment that she had read of in a hundred romances had come. Annie blushed up to her eyes, closed them gently, and held her breath. Happy, happy Annie!

‘Y-e-s,’ she answered, with demure hesitation.

‘May I, you don’t object to smoke, may I light a cheroot?’

She said yes again, but in a very different tone, with a quaver. She remembered, however, having heard (or read) that men smoked energetically whenever a crisis came. He was puffing—therefore this was a crisis. Her face brightened.

‘How long . . . er . . . have we known one another, Miss Annie?’

She thought three years.

‘Seems much longer,’ said he.

‘Oh, much,’ answered Annie.

Cris rarely walked quickly, but now he stopped altogether. Annie’s heart was in her mouth almost, when an angry yelp, followed by piercing cries, came from the dining-room; Cris made a step or two; the spell was broken.

‘The children!’ exclaimed Annie, running to the house.

Cris hurried after her, (for the cries increased), and they soon reached Mrs. Tweedy’s young family.

The dining-room, whither Mrs. Topham and Mrs. Tweedy had already hastened, was the scene of indescribable havoc and lamentation. Jumper, roused from his slumbers, had endured much; but at length he had turned on his persecutors, and this was the result. He was master of the situation as he stood on the middle of the table yelping, snapping, and showing his teeth. Augusta, in a terrified attempt to escape, had knocked against the dumb-waiter, which had overthrown her, and there she sat among the ruins of all Mr. Topham’s choice relishes, a brown sauce dripping down her face, and her tangled hair full of chutnee. She was un-

hurt, but frightened out of her wits, and screaming like one possessed. Dora, as she clung to her elder sister's skirts, and listened to the revengeful growls from Jumper, was screaming too. Willy made all the noise she could. Mrs. Tweedy scolded like a fishwife. Annie and Cris held their sides and laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks.

'Be quiet, hold your tongues,' shouted Mrs. Tweedy, giving her second girl a good shake. 'How did this happen, Nora?'

After many threats and promises, Nora gave her version with historic brevity.

'Dora and Gussie tried to pull Jumper's hind legs apart, and he didn't like it.'

Repairs began. Jumper came to terms, and consented, on receiving a chicken-bone, to suspend hostilities, at least for the present. The children stopped yelling, and were combed and washed. The carpet was

wiped, and the broken bottles removed. Mrs. Tweedy then made a long apology, related how Augusta always had the most marvellous escapes, until one could not help thinking her quite a clever child; and finally, to Mrs. Topham's relief, departed with her offspring.

‘Will Cris come into the garden again?’ thought Annie.

No. He was looking serious, and, after exchanging a few remarks with Mrs. Topham, he shook hands in his gentle, leisurely manner, and went to his club.

Annie returned to the terrace, in very low spirits. ‘Just when he was getting *so* interesting,’ she whimpered; ‘just when he was going to . . . to . . . Hang Jumper!’

She stamped her little foot, and down the fair cheek stole a tear—a silent witness to the impression made in a certain quarter by Mr. Cristopher Parry.

CHAPTER IX.

AUNT ROBBY'S TEA-PARTY.

WE have lately seen a young gentleman bestowing much care upon his personal appearance, and must now reverently contemplate an old lady bestowing equal care upon hers. Mrs. Robertson, of the Elms, was to receive all Baybridge at five o'clock, and was bent upon looking her best. How different from Cris's yellow curls were those old-fashioned, snow-white 'cork-screw' ones that were to hang two on each side of Aunt Robby's venerable countenance. Her maid Bridget, though getting blind and deaf, was still equal to the im-

portant task ; with what infinite care did she lay those 'lockes in press,' and draw them down round her shrivelled forefinger. Then the ancient black, watered silk, full in the flounces, had to be donned ; and the peaked cap, a masterpiece of softness and crispness and delicate frilling, to be tied in a becoming bow under the pointed chin. Lower down were pinned some moss-roses that Judith had sent. A last touch of the powder-puff, a drop of lavender water on the lace handkerchief, a word of praise to the admiring Bridget, and Aunt Robby sailed downstairs.

There, the screen behind which Will Sutton had hidden from Judith had been taken away, and the folding doors near it opened, so that both drawing-rooms were ready for the guests. Aunt Robby's entertainments were no ordinary 'tea-fights,' to use her own expression, they were more

‘substantial.’ Muffins and crumpets, white bread and brown bread, cakes of all sorts and sizes ; with sherry and sandwiches for the gentlemen, and cocoa-nut-rock and butter-scotch for the children to take away ; and a hearty welcome all round—this was Aunt Robby’s liberal programme. No half measures. She expected everyone to appear, like herself, in gala uniform. No hurried visits ; hats, coats, and mantles to be surrendered in the hall.

Will led the aged dame to the arm-chair ; so posted that its occupant could see round both rooms.

‘I hope you’re contented, Aunt Robby,’ said he. ‘Without partiality, I can assure you the rooms look grand. Haven’t those pots of heather a good effect ?’

‘Quite wonderful. Are you sure there’ll be enough for everybody to eat and drink ?’

Will smiled.

‘Enough for a colony of men, women, and children.’

Nicholas Tucker and his daughters were the first arrivals.

‘My dear lady,’ said the former, ‘this is a pleasure, to see you looking so well and handsome. No return of the rheumatism, I hope?’

‘Nothing to speak of, thank you, Mr. Tucker.’

‘Were the pine oils of any use?’

‘I think so. It was so kind——’

‘And how is Sophia’ (a carriage horse) ‘after her accident?’

‘Rather shaken, I fear. Like myself, she’s getting old.’

‘How old?’ asked Mr. Tucker.

Mrs. Robertson drew herself up. Clementina explained that Papa had not alluded to dear Mrs. Robertson’s age . . . would not take such a liberty under the circumstances . . . but to Sophia.

Fortunately, at that moment, the Tophams made their appearance. Mr. Topham inquired after the health of his hostess, wished her medical attendant, Dr. Stevens, would take a hint now and then from people who had ideas, meaning himself; settled the weather beyond dispute for the next week; and took up his station by the folding doors, from where he laid down the law to everyone on every subject during the rest of the evening. Will talked to Judith, and Annie broke a pointless lance with Mr. Tucker.

A big man, in shooting jacket and knickerbockers, now swaggered down the room. It was Captain Handcock.

‘Dee-lighted, Mrs. Robertson, dee-lighted.’

In spite of his dress, which, all things considered, was nearly an insult to Aunt Robby, she received him graciously. He sat down by the Misses Tucker. They were

yellow and spiteful, but they had money, and Captain Handcock was again 'Dee-lighted.'

This gentleman (if the term can by courtesy be applied to him) prided himself upon being an old hand. He might amuse himself with Kate Tweedy, but it was one of these uninviting spinsters that he was going to marry. He had ferreted out as much about their father's affairs as he could; much was obscure, the fortune had been exaggerated, some of it seemed precariously invested—still a good lump was left. Which daughter would, in the future, have the largest share? This was a question still unanswered, and so the captain devoted himself to both. Time would show him what card to play.

He made some civil speeches, and his attention was then drawn away by Mrs. Tweedy and her children, who had just

entered. The children were kissed all round by Aunt Robby, and sent upstairs. Mrs. Tweedy fastened upon Mr. Tucker, and tried to tell him of Augusta's wonderful escape that morning, but he hurried into the other room, and she fastened on another victim.

Mrs. Jackson, followed by Ambrose and Cris Parry arm-in-arm, came next. And the party was completed (the member being in town) by a gaunt, melancholy man, Dr. Stevens.

'How do, Miss Annie?' said Cris. 'Ah . . . er . . . quite forgot we were to meet again this afternoon.'

'So did I, Mr. Parry,' replied she, with a toss of the head. 'And I think it kind to say so.'

'I meant no offence,' said Cris.

Annie's face melted into smiles, and she began chattering like a magpie. Would

Mr. Parry forgive her . . . her . . . want of manners; and get her some tea? And so the simple people patched up their little squabble.

‘Judith,’ said Will, at the other end of the room, ‘who is that dark man with the stern features, standing near your sister and her friend?’

‘Ambrose Jackson,’ said Judith, ‘the son of the quiet-looking woman talking to mamma. He’s a politician—a Liberal.’

‘I don’t care for politicians,’ said Will, ‘and I’m sure I should object to that one. He looks as hard as nails.’

As Will spoke, a sally from Cris amused Ambrose, and a smile flashed on his stern face and gave it a moment’s sunshine.

‘I was wrong,’ confessed Will; ‘he has got a heart.’

‘Oh, yes, when you come to know him,’ said Judith.

‘Do *you* know him so well?’ asked Will Sutton, with meaning.

Judith coloured.

‘No. We have met only a few times. But I know Mrs. Jackson.’

‘And accept her version of his character?’ said Will, drily.

The person they were speaking of now saw Mrs. Robertson beckoning to him. He obeyed the summons.

‘Mr. Jackson,’ said the old lady, ‘come here, please, Mr. Jackson. Why aren’t you laughing and talking, and taking a glass of wine and amusing yourself?’

‘Thank you,’ said Ambrose, with a respect in his tone that flattered his hostess. ‘I’m amusing myself very much. And so is everybody else also.’

‘You’re not talking,’ said the old lady. ‘Rattle, rattle, is now and then good for us all, even if we say nothing wise. Sit

down, do. I take a great interest in all young men, if they're handsome—there, there, I'm an old woman, and have my say. I'm going to ask all sorts of inquisitive questions.'

'You are very kind,' said Ambrose.

'Aren't you secretary to Mr. Macintosh? Is the work interesting?'

'Fairly so,' said Ambrose. 'There is drudgery, of course, but that's indispensable for success and distinction.'

'And you covet these?'

'I work for them, and expect the reward of my labour. I don't believe in circumstances ever making a man fail. Failure is guilt, in nine cases out of ten traceable to folly or to idleness.'

Something like pity shone in Aunt Robby's eyes. 'A hard standard, Mr. Jackson.'

'By which I hope to be judged myself,' was the quiet answer.

‘And what do you have to do? I warned you to expect cross-examination.’

‘Not at all,’ said Ambrose. ‘My work is to answer letters on political matters addressed to my employer; to watch, day by day, public opinion on subjects that interest him; to interview his constituents; and to keep myself in touch with all sorts and conditions of men. Besides, there’s a good deal of desk-work—statistics, reports, and so on.’

‘And you are on friendly terms with Mr. Macintosh?’

‘We pull fairly well together. We’re of use to one another.’

‘Ah!’ said Mrs. Robertson; and she changed the subject at once, and asked him what he thought of society in Bay-bridge.

‘I shouldn’t like to live here always,’ said Ambrose, frankly.

‘If you did, you’d have to choose a wife,’ laughed Aunt Robby. ‘Perhaps you don’t know that I’m an incurable match-maker? oh, yes, I am. Make your choice at once,’ she added, glancing round the room, ‘and count upon my support.’

Ambrose fixed his eyes on Elizabeth Tucker.

Mrs. Robertson positively crowed with delight.

‘I thought you’d do better, Mr. Jackson. I thought you’d choose one of my favourites, Judith or Annie Topham. But you’re too sharp for me. I’ll introduce you to somebody with more brains—though I was counted sharp in my day.’

‘That I can well understand,’ said Ambrose.

The old lady called Will Sutton, and said,

‘Mr. Jackson, this is a very old friend

of mine. He has travelled much, and, in his youth ' (here Sutton frowned), 'knew most people worth knowing. I hope you may have some tastes in common.'

There was no attempt at shaking hands ; the men bowed stiffly. Will was jealous of the other's youth and good looks. Ambrose scrutinised him calmly—had the man anything in him? Aunt Robby, divining that something was amiss, urged Will to show his portfolio of sketches to his new acquaintance.

Ambrose hated amateurs, but would not vex his hostess. To his surprise, the sketches, both in choice of subject and breadth of treatment, showed marked ability. Intolerant of pretence, Ambrose loved talent, which he seldom failed to recognize ; and his admiration was warmly expressed. Will was so gratified that he forgave Ambrose when, a moment later,

he pointed out an error in perspective.

‘You are right,’ he said, marking the sketch for alteration. ‘I’m afraid I work with more impulse than exactness.’

‘Have you ever exhibited?’ asked Ambrose.

‘Exhibited? No. Why should I?’

‘To make a name,’ said Ambrose. ‘Surely such talent as yours must have ambition.’

‘My ambitions are dead,’ answered Will, shutting the portfolio. ‘Can I introduce you to anyone? Do you know the Tophams?’ he asked, though well aware that Jackson did.

‘I have the pleasure,’ replied Ambrose, shortly.

‘I know them very intimately,’ volunteered Will. ‘I remember Judith and Annie Topham as mere children.’

‘My memory would not go back so far,’ smiled Ambrose. ‘Excuse me, my mother

is looking for some place to put down her cup.'

He crossed the room, rather abruptly closing the conversation.

'What do you think of him, Will?' inquired Mrs. Robertson.

'Selfish,' said Will.

Cris put a similar question to Ambrose.

'Brains. But no go. Wishy-washy,' was the answer.

These unfavourable impressions were only natural, the characters and the circumstances of Will Sutton and of Ambrose Jackson affording as striking a contrast as could well be imagined. Will, a disappointed man, with his opportunities behind him; much of his bright faith in human goodness destroyed; his aspirations blunted, his sensibilities increased; a man with no leading idea to shed a ray of light upon the future; somewhat embittered by

sorrow and illness, yet much softened by both; always dreaming, never acting; always yearning for sympathy. Such was William Sutton. The young politician, how different! Sanguine of success, the world opening at his feet; with a fixed standard by which to judge his fellow-creatures—and himself; allowing no clouds to dull his vision, no trifles to wound his pride; driven onward by one central force that seemed hitherto to pilot him safely past the shoals and rocks; indifferent to censure; robust as a mountaineer; never thinking but to act; seeking no sympathy and offering none. Such was Ambrose Jackson. Such he was to remain until experience should either confirm his opinions or prove them to be unsound.

Judith, who had watched their meeting with some curiosity, wished to be friends with both of them; in each case for a

different reason. She pitied Will, and valued their early intimacy. She was fascinated by Ambrose. She tried to deny the fact to herself, but she could not. There was no love as yet; the fascination was sometimes even painful. What would he do or say next? she could not help this expectant attitude. It resulted from the conviction that the power lying under that calm must leave its stamp even on trifling actions and in ordinary conversation.

Will talked to her nearly the whole evening, and would have amused her well enough in the absence of Ambrose. Beyond a salutation, Ambrose paid her no attention till the party was going to break up, and then he sat down beside her.

Mr. Jackson had almost resolved not to pursue the acquaintance which had been virtually begun on the way to the Elms the evening before. But he never liked

being worsted, and he felt that he had been worsted on that occasion. So he joined Judith in a very haughty frame of mind. She understood his formality, and determined to force him to be agreeable and talkative. She was unsuccessful, partly because his mood affected hers, and made her formal too. The conversation went on stilts, became stiff and jerky, and stood still. Impulsive Judith cried:

‘You’re very reserved, Mr. Jackson.’

‘So are you, Miss Topham.’

Neither of them could help laughing.

‘We accuse each other of reserve,’ said Ambrose, won over by her frankness; ‘that’s a proof that we both object to it. Shall we make a league and covenant that between us, at least, there shall in future be no reserve?’

Ambrose had still to learn the weight of a woman’s influence. He would have

smiled had anyone prophesied, two days ago, that he would ever so unbend to Judith Topham.

‘Willingly,’ was her answer. ‘I will behave better when we meet again. So must you. Good-bye for the present. I see my father is going to take us home.’

They shook hands and parted, on the whole very well pleased with one another. The tea-party was at an end.

Ambrose, with his mother and Cris, were among the last to leave. The three stopped in the hall for a moment, watching Mrs. Tweedy and Mr. Tucker, who stood under the porch waging a battle royal.

Mrs. Tweedy had not yet succeeded in getting Nicholas to listen to her narrative of the Augusta incident, and of the really quite remarkable way in which a special providence seemed to watch over that darling child. Several times she had made

the attempt, and been repulsed by the capitalist. She now placed herself in the doorway, umbrella in one hand, purse in the other, and by rapid to and fro manœuvres had hitherto prevented the enemy's escape. Nicholas, on his part, was gruffly determined not to listen to a word, and was losing patience.

‘Cris,’ whispered Jackson, ‘bet you a sov. on the lady.’

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ was the answer. ‘Tucker has no more manners than a hog. He’ll walk over the poor little woman.’

This seemed to be his intention. Mrs. Tweedy lost ground; but retrieved her fortunes by a brilliant stratagem. She held out her purse to Nicholas, he involuntarily took it; she then put her hands behind her back, and, as he could not well run away with her property, triumphantly obliged him to hear her story from beginning to end.

‘A sovereign in my pocket,’ laughed Ambrose. ‘Mother, Mrs. Tweedy is a strategist of the first order. No wonder she proves more than a match for poor James.’

Next morning Ambrose went back to his duties in London.

CHAPTER X.

THE PORTRAIT.

THE winter was very severe, the March winds more biting than ever, it seemed; and so everybody hailed with gratitude the coming of the month of the poets with its promise and its bloom, the merry month of May.

Annie Topham and Cris Parry did not care whether it was March or May. They were quite taken up with each other just now. Cris had proposed. Through what mental struggles he went before performing this great feat, can be matter only of conjecture. The care and time bestowed upon

his toilette on that eventful morning can be known only to Mr. Lloyd. His master resembled (so the valet said downstairs) a 'resplendent Hadonis.' Cris, when the critical moment came, proposed in the simplest way. A word for him, a happy sob from Annie; and that was all; no, not quite all!

Cris, for once in his life, would hear of no delay. If they were to be married, what reason could there be for putting it off? Annie found none. But, when Cris supposed he had better go through the time-honoured process of 'asking Mamma,' Annie demurred; it might be better to speak in the first instance to her father. Mrs. Topham was fond of Cris. He was well-to-do. As sleeping partner he drew about fifteen hundred a year from a London house, and appeared in this respect a good match for portionless Annie. But

Mrs. Topham lamented his total want of energy, and had always urged him to take an active part in the business. Annie thought this might possibly be made the condition of her mother's consent. On the other hand, she was her father's favourite, and imagined that, if his support was once promised, all difficulties would be overcome. The lover's conspiracy came to grief speedily: Mr. Topham did indeed fix a day with cheerful alacrity; but his wife declared that Annie should never marry an idle man, and in spite of her husband's ill-humour and her daughter's tears, adhered to this determination. Judith scolded Cris soundly; if he really loved Annie, would he do nothing to win her? He promised to do his best; but day after day passed without any exertion. Meanwhile Baybridge was given to understand that there was a two years' engagement.

While Cris was thus shrinking from all useful employment, his friend, Ambrose Jackson, pursued with unfaltering step the objects of his ambition.

Jackson surprised even those of his colleagues who knew him best, by the influence he was beginning to acquire in political circles. Men of twice his age and experience found themselves harassed at every turn, and often thwarted, by Mr. Mackintosh's young secretary. As Ambrose, though at present in Liberal pay, took care to have it well known that he had not committed himself irretrievably, several attempts were made to detach him from Mr. Mackintosh. Ambrose accepted none of these offers; but he used them as a lever to obtain more advantageous terms from his chief. Mr. Mackintosh had no choice but to submit, hoping for the day when he could dispense with the services

which he was now forced to purchase at such a high figure, and to secure with more confidence in his subordinate than was altogether pleasant. To Ambrose the increase of salary thus obtained was all the more welcome because he wished to improve his bachelor's establishment, and to keep pace with his rising importance.

Notwithstanding his advancement, and busier life that it entailed, Ambrose found time for frequent visits to his mother. He spent every Sunday with her; and whenever there was a lull in public affairs he hastened down to enjoy a few days of her company. On these occasions Ambrose was seen at his best. His worldliness disappeared; he devoted himself wholly to his mother, and with exemplary patience took her to visit all Baybridge. As a reward for this good behaviour he frequently met Mr. Topham's eldest daughter.

A reward it was ; Ambrose acknowledged that by now. This girl, with her transparent goodness, her direct outspoken fidelity, was a contrast to many of his friends in town. The compact made on the day of Mrs. Robertson's tea-party, by virtue of which there was to be no more reserve between them, had been playfully entered into, but by degrees was observed with all gravity. In this way Ambrose learned much about Judith's past ; and soon drew from her a partial confession of her present anxieties. By questioning his mother, too, Ambrose discovered how difficult it had become for the Tophams, not so much to keep up appearances, but even to pay the weekly bills ; how Judith, to whose lot that task chiefly fell, had no one to help her in the bitter struggle against poverty, nay, how her father, in his reckless optimism, opposed her from day to

day. When Mrs. Jackson told this to her son he was forcibly struck, and remained standing for some moments in earnest meditation. The difference between his own motives and Judith's rebuked him. The next time they met he astonished her by the deep tone of respect with which he spoke, and yet more by his look of admiration. He wished that Judith had been differently situated. Why had circumstances raised an impassable barrier between them, seeing that Ambrose could offer his hand only to a woman of 'position'? Mrs. Jackson watched him closely, and had reason to be satisfied with the progress of her favourite scheme.

Many people who never wilfully deceive others have an unfortunate knack of deceiving themselves when any really important question arises in which their feelings are deeply engaged. Judith Topham,

though falling far short of perfection in other respects, had not this fault. Nearly two months ago she had begun to examine herself strictly as to whether or not she were in love with Ambrose Jackson. Hitherto she had arrived at no decision ; but when a woman reaches this stage of deliberate inquiry, it may, in nine cases out of ten, be safely predicted that (in hope, at least) the journey will lead to an open church door. Judith had been once deceived by specious appearances ; but she had profited by the lesson, and determined that first impressions should not again lead her astray. She admired Ambrose. She thought him every inch a man. His very step had a language of its own ; and his voice had such a powerful effect upon Judith that she felt that if ever he stooped to entreaty she could not possibly say no. Yet she knew and grieved over much

in him ; and her heart sank as she considered how likely he was to sacrifice love to ambition, and to find out his mistake when too late. *He stoop to entreaty ? To her ?* ' What a fool I am ; he will never ask me to marry him,' sighed poor Judith.

She kept her own counsel, even towards Annie. Those ' chats ' before bed-time in which they, like so many other sisters, indulged, were devoted almost solely to discussing the virtues of Mr. Christopher Parry. Only now and then did Judith yield to temptation, and throw in a good word or so for Ambrose.

Her intercourse with him had been free from any approach to embarrassment, but that sudden change in his manner already mentioned caused her much confusion. To what could it be ascribed ? Judith was not conceited, but, as she knew nothing of the conversation between mother

and son respecting her, it was natural to suppose that Ambrose took more interest in her than formerly. So he did. Henceforth his coming was always heralded by a blush on Judith's cheek.

There was a much less pleasant reason for shyness. The Misses Tucker had amply justified Mrs. Jackson's opinion that they would say anything, and they had industriously circulated reports in which the names of Judith and Ambrose were joined. These reports reached Judith eventually, and gave her as much pain as the spiteful spinsters hoped. No hint reached Ambrose, even Mrs. Tweedy hesitated to pass the whisper on to *him*. But Judith lived in hourly fear of such a catastrophe. Meanwhile a handle for the gossip was being shaped by the indiscretion of one of her best friends.

Will Sutton had settled down in Bay-

bridge, close to the Elms, and announced his intention of staying in the neighbourhood for the next two years. He gave several cogent reasons for not living on his estate in Surrey. The house was too large and rambling for a single man to be comfortable in it, and he had no friends whom he cared to invite for a long stay. Besides, he wished to lay down plantations, and to redecorate parts of his home, and for this outlay economy was necessary. But the one reason which outweighed all others never passed Will Sutton's lips. Lazy Cris might wonder whether Annie's hand was worth working for; Ambrose might regret what he considered the exigencies of his position; Judith might alternate between hopes and fears;—but he, Will, had a different spirit. With every fibre of his nature he loved Judith. He hardly knew when his love

had begun, enough for him that it was there.

It supplied him with what had been long wanting to him, an ambition. His ambition was to win Judith, and if possible, to be worthy of her. To this point all his energy tended. He forsook the morbid atmosphere in which he had long bewailed his errors, and walked into the sunlight. He would not admit the possibility of failure; such devotion as his must be returned. Aunt Robby said that the air of Baybridge agreed with him, that he looked ten years younger. Judith, who happened to be present, assented, little thinking how her words sent his heart throbbing. Could this man with the elastic step and bright looks be the same to whom Ambrose had been introduced at the Elms?

He was jealous of Ambrose, of course. But he had no grave apprehensions in that

quarter. Will had several times met men of his stamp, and knew how self-absorbed they were apt to become. Ambrose might fall in love with Judith,—but propose to her? Will did not fear that. Fortunately for his present peace of mind he rather misunderstood Ambrose.

Will, though he was never happy out of Judith's sight, was too wise to risk his prospects by any precipitation. As yet, Judith had evidently no suspicion of his intentions. She distressed him by her very kindness, for it was that sort of kindness which is paid to an uncle or to a guardian. Will, after a cautious attempt to break the ground, resolved to bide his time. It was a sore trial to his patience, and he consoled himself with the trifling follies in use among lovers. He had quite a collection of treasures, common things which had become treasures from the touch of

Judith's fingers : a programme of a ball, a bunch of faded primroses, a couple of three-cornered notes beginning Dear Will, and ending Your affectionate Judith, and last, but not least, a photograph. The photograph had been taken two years before, and this circumstance, besides being a matter of regret to Will, led him into a little plot, which was to have an unpleasant ending.

One May morning, with the plot in his head, he directed his steps to Mrs. Jackson's house. He convinced himself first that Ambrose was in town ; for, though civil to one another, they were not on cordial terms. And the plot required secrecy for its execution.

Mrs. Jackson was at home. Though the quiet life to which she was condemned had its drawbacks, it enabled her to devote herself to the pursuit of her art, which,

after Ambrose, was her chief delight. This occupation prevented her from inviting any other woman similarly situated to share her home, an arrangement for which Ambrose had at first pleaded. Her son made a studio by taking down the partition wall between two rooms at the back of the house ; and, though the light could have been better, the new studio fairly answered the purpose. Here Mrs. Jackson stood by the hour, working and dreaming ; and here she was standing before her easel when Will Sutton called.

Mrs. Jackson had only two servants, and they were both absent, the cook on duty, the housemaid on pleasure. Will, after ringing several times in vain, walked in, and knocked at the studio door.

The artist hated publicity, and Baybridge was so inquisitive that she was compelled to work in a state of siege, with

closed doors; and she seldom received anyone except in her drawing-room. Will was an exception. He was not meddlesome, and he knew more than most amateurs know about painting. Mrs. Jackson liked him, too, for his own sake. Will, then, was admitted, and after discussing for some time the unfinished picture on the easel, began to lead up to the object of his visit. He had already disposed of several pictures for Mrs. Jackson, who had told him what she so studiously concealed from Ambrose, that she worked for something more than pin-money. This made the beginning easier.

‘Have any more orders come in, Mrs. Jackson?’ asked he.

‘Only one,’ was the reply. ‘I have refused it, the pay would have been so wretchedly small.’

‘In that case, if you would not be offended——’

‘Offended! No, Mr. Sutton. You have some work for me? You looked like business when you came in. I should be grateful for any order only—only—let it be some subject that I could treat *con amore*—something better than splashbacks and sunsets.’

‘A portrait?’ asked Will.

‘A portrait,’ exclaimed Mrs. Jackson. ‘My favourite work. But who in Bay-bridge wants a portrait painted?’

‘I do,’ said Will.

‘I understand,’ replied Mrs. Jackson. ‘You want to hang it among the other family portraits at Radalls; and you kindly think I might be equal to the task. No, no, I cannot run the risk of having my poor handiwork placed in the same hall with the masterpieces you own.’

‘Like most people who can do good work you are very humble, Mrs. Jackson,’ said Will, sincerely. ‘No, mine shall never hang

in the hall at Radalls. I want a lady's portrait painted.'

Mrs. Jackson looked up quickly.

'Whose?'

'Let me explain,' said Will. 'You know what an old friend I am of the Tophams, especially of Mrs. Topham.'

'And of the girls,' said the lady.

'Of course,' said Will. 'But Mrs. Topham is an older friend than they are; and I have taken it into my head to surprise her with a present. All I want is your aid in the conspiracy. I intend to make her a present of Judith's portrait.'

'Why of Judith's any more than of Annie's?'

'Because Judith is her favourite daughter,' said Will.

'And because,' said Mrs. Jackson, with a smile, 'nothing would persuade Annie to sit, I am sure.'

‘Neither must Judith sit,’ said Will, hastily. ‘The whole thing is to be a surprise. You see her frequently, you will overcome the difficulty; you will have opportunities for making observations and studies.’

Mrs. Jackson laughed.

‘I am not so clever as that, Mr. Sutton. But, as it happens, I could undertake the picture. Wait a moment.’

And, unlocking a cupboard in the wall, she produced several water-colour sketches of Judith: and explained that Will’s young friend had already sat for a model to a picture since sold.

Will examined the sketches attentively.

‘You *can* help me, Mrs. Jackson; will you? Of course I know the value of your time and skill.’

This delicate way of hinting that she was to be well paid for her work settled

the matter; for Mrs. Jackson knew that Ambrose was in want of money, and could not really afford all that he allowed her. Had Will asked her to paint Judith's portrait for *him*, no matter how plausibly he might have stated his case, Mrs. Jackson would have discovered his real motive at once. But Mrs. Topham was to have the picture. Sly Will intended, after the present had been gratefully accepted, to ask for a copy, a request that could not well be refused, and would not arouse suspicion. This manœuvre, far too subtle for anyone but a lover, quite imposed upon Mrs. Jackson. The conspirators shook hands, and the artist, pointing to her cupboard, said that the secret should be kept safe from prying eyes.

Will departed, well satisfied with the result of his visit.

That afternoon, Mrs. Jackson had just

finished ordering the materials for the portrait, when, to her disgust, she heard at her elbow the sharp voice of Elizabeth Tucker.

‘ Ah, there you are, dear Mrs. Jackson,’ said Elizabeth. ‘ Ordering something for a new picture? I heard you giving *most* particular orders. Don’t, now, please don’t think me impertinent if I ask——’

‘ Please don’t ask anything,’ said Helen, quietly.

‘ Dearest Clementina,’ cried Elizabeth to her sister, ‘ do persuade Mrs. Jackson. Now, we are bent upon knowing, dear Mrs. Jackson.’

‘ And I am equally bent upon the contrary,’ said Mrs. Jackson, with a half-smile, as she went on her way.

‘ Clementina, my love,’ said Elizabeth, as the sisters stood in High Street, ‘ what’s this? Didn’t you notice her confusion?’

‘Quite marked!’ was the answer.

‘I’m not inquisitive, but I hate underhand people,’ said Miss Tucker. ‘We must find this out, Clem, my love.’

‘Yes, Lizzie, my love,’ echoed Clementina.

CHAPTER XI.

PETER TOPHAM ON FINANCE.

PROBABLY those who 'come down' in the world, if they stop short of actual privation, suffer less from the want of accustomed luxuries than from the necessity of keeping up appearances. There are certain well-defined stages which mark the descent from affluence to poverty, and there is, moreover, in the opinion of the head of the family, a certain point at which the line has to be drawn. One man, no longer able to fill a country house, thinks himself bound to entertain on a smaller scale. Another, reflecting that many well-to-do people seldom entertain, and that he

never can, would shrink from the idea of his wife having no carriage. Some go through these and other stages, reluctantly lowering their standard as their income decreases. Mr. Peter Topham had passed through them, cheerfully, according to his wont, and had now drawn a hard and fast line at late dinner.

Of course 'late' dinner is incomprehensible to those favoured beings who ignore or disregard the fact that there is, in some social depth far beneath them, such a thing as early dining. Peter Topham thrust this fact, as something that could in no wise concern him, resolutely out of his consciousness. Come what might, he would never dine at half-past one. Never would he endure that abomination, suggestive of cheap sea-side lodging-houses and fading 'gentility,'—that hybrid meal, known as high tea.

Mr. Topham enforced every decision he arrived at with so much emphasis that it must have been difficult for him to lay additional stress on any particular command. He had, however, been led to do so in this question of to dine or not to dine, by several attempts of Judith to introduce a new order of things, and had desired that the subject should not be again broached—with a threat of his extreme displeasure in case of rebellion. Yet who will believe that in spite of all he had done for his family, and all the self-denial he had gone through on their behalf, Judith (for the sake of a few tradespeople's paltry bills) was going to attack him once more in his most vulnerable point?

Judith had put off the evil day as long as she dared, and she now went carefully through the accounts again to see if by

any means her father could still be indulged. But every expense had been pared down as finely as possible already. She went upstairs to her mother.

Mrs. Topham, who was always ailing, had been obliged by a bad headache to lie down ; and the room was darkened.

‘Is that you, Judith?’ asked her meek voice.

‘Yes, mother ; how is your head now?’

‘Better, dear. Will you pull up the blinds. Better, Judith. If there could be less worry I’m sure I should get strong.’

‘I can’t help it,’ replied Judith, almost in tears. ‘I’ve brought some more worry with me now. I’ve been looking over the bills. We can’t get into debt. We must dismiss one servant at once, and to do that we must have tea in the evening.’

‘Your father, Judith.’

‘It must be done,’ was the firm answer.

‘ I have written down exactly how we stand. My father must know we can’t coin money.’

‘ He has had so many troubles, Jue,’ pleaded her mother.

Judith smiled bitterly.

‘ What have they been compared with yours?’ she said.

‘ My, dear, women are made to suffer. That’s their position. Well, you explain to your father, and I’ll say what I can.’

‘ No, mother, you must explain, and insist. If you won’t, I don’t see what I can do.’

‘ Don’t desert me, Jue,’ cried Mrs. Topham, piteously.

‘ Desert you, mother !’

Eventually it was arranged that Judith should begin, and receive support from her mother. This had been the plan of previous campaigns ; but Mrs. Topham had invariably gone over to the enemy. She now promised staunch assistance.

After dinner that night Annie, at a sign from her sister, withdrew; and Judith began with,

‘Father, mother has something important to say to you.’

Mr. Topham had been holding up a biscuit to attract the dachshünd who stood in the dusk outside the closed window. He now mechanically transferred the morsel to his own mouth, to the great disappointment of his four-footed dependant; and said, with the utmost good-humour,

‘Something important? Maria, my dear, I am all attention.’

Mrs. Topham’s courage, never very pronounced, failed.

‘I understand,’ said her husband. ‘Ways and means, is it not? Where is my pretty Chancellor of the Exchequer? Whew! Judith, what a long face. We are poor; that is, I think, what our French neigh-

bours call an accomplished fact. But is poverty synonymous with misery? Decidedly not. Let us be contented and happy.'

'We are not discontented, Peter. Don't think that,' said wavering Mrs. Topham.

'But,' struck in Judith, 'we must face facts. We are spending more, far more than our income. Father, we do our best. Mother would do anything for you, so would I. But we can only do what we *can* do. A sacrifice must be made. We can't afford to keep three servants.'

'Then why keep them, in the name of goodness?' said Mr. Topham. 'I am not aware that we are compelled to support servants we do not require. Eh, Maria, that seems sensible enough? Want 'em, keep 'em; don't want 'em, don't keep 'em. Very plain sailing that.'

'At present we can't do with less than

three,' said Judith. 'We must send away Barbara, and have tea in the evening.'

'Dear Peter, don't be put out about it,' said Mrs. Topham, disregarding quite a fierce frown from Judith. 'We're only suggesting what we think for the best.'

Mr. Topham gave no immediate answer. Being rather proud of his powers of conversation, he sometimes paused for fitting words in which to clothe his valuable ideas.

He sipped his port awhile, and said:

'I thought we had decided this question long ago. Why go over the same ground again? That's a most fatal habit; possibly a very large share of the failures in life arise from reconsidering a decision arrived at with deliberation.'

'Circumstances alter cases,' said Judith.

'Eh, what do I hear?' said her father. 'Circumstances—cases. Take care, my

dear girl, don't be a pedant. There's nothing more unbecoming in a young woman, or indeed in anybody. Dinner,' continued Mr. Topham, dictatorially, 'is not only an effect, but a cause of civilisation. A man who can order one with judgment, or partake of one with appreciation—is a gentleman, *par excellence*. The mere detail of putting on evening clothes has an untold significance for the observant. Do you suppose I could respect myself if of an evening I sat down in the clothes I have worn all day, to tea and stale bread and butter? Let us hear no more of this, I should lose my self-respect if I lost my dinner. There's a great deal in what I say, Maria?'

'A great deal,' murmured Mrs. Topham, beginning to think that Judith might be wrong.

'You are quite right, father,' said Judith, 'and you shall have everything

you want, if you'll only give me the money.'

'Judith,' said her mother, reproachfully.

'Young ladies,' smiled Mr. Topham, 'are prone to exaggeration. What's the cost of our humble meal? Quite a trifle, I wager.'

'Everything adds up,' said Judith, 'there's the fish, and the soup.'

'A little fish ; a little soup of boiled down odds and ends ! Why, Judith, one would think they cost their weight in gold.'

'The soup to-night was not very expensive, Jue,' ventured Mrs. Topham, passing into flat rebellion.

'And the kitchen fire,' persisted Judith.

'A few coals !' was Mr. Topham's bland reply. 'They must be very cheap at this time of the year. Come, come, Jue, you're laughing at me.'

At this Judith broke down. Had her

father stormed, or even abused her, she could have borne it, and waited quietly before again insisting on the necessary economy. But the terrible levity that came smiling from his lips, outmatched her. She had learnt to control her temper, poor child, but her voice shook as she answered, in a low tone :

‘Father, I see you will not understand. This is my last attempt. In future, somebody else must order what’s wanted: I cannot, knowing that the shopkeepers must lose their money.’

Mrs. Topham started up trembling, and held out her hands in eager entreaty. But her husband showed no sign of anger.

‘A deadlock,’ he said, jauntily, ‘a crisis, threatened resignation of a Minister! Now, Judith, be reasonable.’

Judith handed him the account she had prepared, and, unable to restrain her feel-

ings any longer, left the room abruptly.

‘She is excited and overwrought, Peter, you must not mind,’ said the mother. ‘Judith is a good girl.’

‘Rather overbearing now and then,’ said Mr. Topham. ‘She will learn wisdom after a bit. These passing difficulties are excellent discipline for the girl; she’ll know how to manage a house of her own.’

‘I sometimes think, Peter, that she and Mr. Jackson——’

‘I won’t hear of it, Maria. Once and for all, No!’

Mrs. Topham sighed. She had not been taken into Judith’s confidence, but she had, notwithstanding, detected her growing fondness for Ambrose. Mrs. Topham liked the young politician: it was true he contradicted Peter as often as not, but then he treated her with unvarying courtesy. For some time she had been waiting for an

opportunity to prepare her husband for such an event as a proposal from Ambrose, and it showed her utter want of tact that she chose the present moment. But Peter was not unprepared; the rumours which had failed to reach Ambrose had reached him, and his answer to his wife's hint was the result of a previous resolve. Mrs. Topham, however, though she had no courage for herself, had some for her children, and so she protested.

‘What objection would you have to Mr. Jackson, Peter dear? He is a clever young man; agreeable, I am sure, though sometimes dogmatic; and fairly well off. We must not look too high for Judith—remember, she will not have a farthing of her own.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that, Maria,’ said Mr. Topham. ‘Fortunes have been realized in a very few years before to-day by intelli-

gent and far-seeing men. Now, my dear, may I beg your careful attention for a very few moments?’

So saying, Mr. Topham lighted the gas, and pulled a bundle of papers out of his pocket.

His wife knew what was coming, and turned pale as ashes.

‘I can’t do it, Peter. I can’t, for the children’s sake.’

He paid no heed to this appeal, but, spreading out his papers and pointing to a plan, said,

‘A fortune lies here, if we have only the sense and pluck to grasp it.’

‘I daren’t,’ murmured Mrs. Topham. ‘Don’t let us add to our misfortunes, Peter. I promise you that you shall never be worried again. Only, no more risks—’

‘Risks,’ said Mr. Topham, jovially. ‘I should be obliged to anyone who could

point out a risk in this undertaking. Mind, Maria, I have done nothing by deputy, I have gone into the whole thing myself. Surely that sets your mind at ease?’

‘Yes, Peter, I know how clever you are. But, still, last time——’

‘I did all that was possible. If a scoundrel ran away with the money, am I to blame?’

‘Who blames you, Peter?’

‘I thought, my dear, something in your voice—no? Well, so much the better. You are a loving, good woman, Maria, and I can’t bear to see you without your carriage and pair. Now these brick-works—*they* can’t run away, eh, Maria? To buy and work them—only four thousand pounds!’

‘It’s nearly all we have. Think of the girls, Peter. I daren’t.’

‘It’s chiefly on their account,’ said Mr.

Topham, contradicting himself, 'that I am so anxious to profit by this splendid opportunity. A word from you to Mr. Slade, and the brick-works become mine—at least yours.'

Mr. Slade was the family lawyer.

'He'll never let me touch a farthing, Peter; he said so last time.'

'Of course he'll scold and pretend he knows better than anyone else. These lawyers oppose anything that brings more than four per cent., on principle. But the money is not tied up, it's yours, you can dispose of it as you please.'

'Are you sure, quite sure, there is no risk?' asked his wife.

'I give you my word of honour there is none,' said Peter; and he dilated so eloquently upon its advantages that the feeble woman wavered.

'At least let us consult Judith,' said she, clinging to the last straw.

‘Certainly, Maria—that is, if you think Judith has more sense than I have. You have perhaps a right to distrust me. I never forget that when I married you I was penniless. If you don’t think I’ve acted throughout for the best——’

His poor wife interrupted him with a burst of tears. She was powerless against the weapons he used with such heartless want of scruple. She promised to write to the lawyer and state her wishes; and to say nothing to Judith. Her husband kissed her with every appearance of affection; he spoke in glowing terms of the future, with its bountiful harvest, and she believed in him still, and thought him perhaps the most unfortunate, but still the cleverest and wisest of mankind.

Time alone could prove the worth of Peter Topham’s last experiment in finance.

CHAPTER XII.

BY THE RIVER.

JUDITH, on leaving her parents, felt quite unable to join Annie. She was going up to her own room, when, as she passed through the hall, the cool night air played upon her cheek. She was in that disturbed state of mind to which any bodily exertion comes as a relief; and no sooner was a walk suggested to her in this way than she took down her hood and cloak, and hurried out of doors. Afraid of being recalled, and perhaps having in her present mood to play or to sing to her father, she did not pause till at some distance from

the house. Then she walked more slowly, submitting to the influence of the calm summer night.

Very calm and peaceful it was ; and Judith stood still at length, looking at the villas on the hillside, the straggling town beyond them, and the river flowing in a silver curve beneath the stone bridge. Judith lingered. The breeze was just strong enough to set the green boughs around her swinging, and to waft the perfumes over from the nearest gardens. No sound broke the silence, nature seemed to hold communion with God.

Suddenly two women emerged from a side path in front of Judith, and strolled down the hill. She could not distinguish their figures, but the shrill, discordant voices could belong only to the Misses Tucker.

The sight of these women, whom Judith

cordially detested, robbed her of her returning peace of mind. Her anger had gone, the sense of weakness remained. Her father, for what sympathy could she or anyone else hope from him; her mother was worse than useless in time of need; Annie was altogether taken up with her lover. Judith was weary of her lot with its struggles and mortifications. She longed for some one to stretch out a helping hand. There was Will Sutton, but he had not the self-reliance of such value in a woman's eyes. There was Ambrose! But Judith dared not indulge a hope in that direction.

She drew the hood closer round her face, and hurried along without paying much attention to where she was going.

Under such circumstances we often find ourselves following some familiar path, and so it was with Judith. On the near bank

of the river, not much below the bridge, was a favourite haunt of hers, a plot of hilly ground enclosed on three sides by a dense thicket. It was quiet, and Judith had one day laughingly pointed it out to Ambrose as they stood on the bridge, as one of the few places in Baybridge safe from the tongue of the gossip. She was rather surprised to find how far she had strayed so late; but sat down on a grassy mound with her chin on her hand, and gazed upon the river flowing in the moonlight. The rushes swayed to and fro, the waters moaned incessantly, some old houses opposite threw gloomy shadows on the stream. It was melancholy enough even for fancied sadness, and Judith, unlike many young ladies, had real grievances with which to contend.

So there she sat till the tears trickled through her fingers.

It happened that Ambrose Jackson, who had come from London for a couple of days, sauntered down High Street, with no other company than that afforded by his own thoughts, and by a cigar. He had been very hard at work lately, and the quiet town was a pleasant change after the grinding and rattling of the London thoroughfares. As Ambrose had nowhere in particular to go to, he stopped on coming to the bridge, and as he leant against the parapet watched the river beneath the arches. Here he became, for him, unpractical and dreamy. He began to review, not the events of the past week, not that pet scheme upon the realization of which his heart was set, to become the next member for the borough ; but every word that had passed between him and Judith Topham. He liked Judith ; he almost loved her. Loneliness came to him, too,

sometimes, and she was so companionable, and so fair to look upon. What sense, what goodness she had. It occurred to Ambrose that his cigar would be as enjoyable, perhaps more enjoyable, if he smoked it on that very spot, quite near at hand, which Judith often brightened with her presence.

He sauntered down to the bank of the river.

Ambrose had decided once and for all that he could never ask Judith to be his wife without resigning that social success for which he panted. But why not think of her, even with fondness? He might not speak of love; but thoughts, they at least were free!

He reached a thick patch of underwood that answered Judith's description; but had to walk all round it before he could find an opening.

‘ I wonder they don’t clear the place and build upon it,’ was his reflection. ‘ Ah, there’s not much enterprise in this part of the world.’

He stopped short, in sheer astonishment, to see, lying almost at his feet, the figure of a woman. The face was turned away ; but the convulsive movement of the shoulders proved that she was sobbing hysterically.

Jackson was touched. He bent towards her saying,

‘ Come, come, this won’t do. You mustn’t give way like that. You’ve a friend at your elbow.’

Roused by the deep, kindly tones, which she recognised immediately, Judith rose to her feet in confusion.

Ambrose could hardly believe his eyes ; and he was far too much amazed to utter a syllable.

‘I feel so—so much ashamed of myself,’ stammered Judith.

‘You have no cause,’ replied Ambrose. “Sorrow is a sacred thing, and, unknowingly, I have broken in upon yours. I told you I was a friend before I knew who you were, and, now that you turn out to be an old friend, I’m not going away empty-handed. Confide in me, dear Miss Topham. I have an idea of what your troubles are about, and, remember, I’m a man of business. Will you tell me all that worries you from beginning to end, if only because two heads are better than one?’

Would she? Here was the very thing for which she had been yearning, somebody to listen who could counsel also, some mind not only sympathetic but strong. Forgetting where they had met, and how late it was, and speaking with an eloquence that Ambrose had never supposed she could

possess, she told the whole story of how they had come down in the world, and how all the efforts to act for the best were thwarted by her father. And then, feeling that he listened kindly and reverentially, she opened her heart more and more, and spoke of the loneliness of her life, with no one to guide or support her.

Ambrose listened, with admiring pity.

When she had finished speaking, he remained so long silent that Judith, though she saw that he was weighing her words, at length asked,

‘What *am* I to do?’

‘Nothing,’ was the unexpected answer.

‘Nothing?’ said Judith.

‘Your troubles,’ replied Ambrose, ‘don’t come so much from want of money as from . . . forgive me, I mean no disrespect . . . as from the peculiar dispositions of those you have to deal with. That being so, your

only resource is patience. But, though you can't mend matters you can prevent them from getting worse. Your father has some new speculation in his head.'

'Heaven forbid!' exclaimed Judith.
'How do you know?'

'Because,' answered Ambrose, 'as long as he can raise a penny, it's as necessary for him to speculate as to live. The disease is incurable. Try to prevent further loss. I understand that before anything else could be risked Mrs. Topham's consent would be necessary?'

'Yes, the money is mother's,' said Judith.

'And will Mrs. Topham take you into her confidence?'

'At once,' said Judith. 'Mother does nothing without me now.'

'Not even if your father insisted?'

‘Mother would tell me,’ said Judith confidently.

‘Then,’ said Ambrose, ‘be prepared for that moment; and oppose any scheme, no matter how plausible, with all your might. That will save you from misfortune in the future. I wish I could do anything to help you in the present.’

‘You have done a great deal,’ said his companion. “You have given me strength and courage. I’ve had my say, and must, I’m afraid, have appeared weak to you.’

Ambrose protested.

‘My only excuse,’ continued she smiling, ‘is that you would find most women the same. It’s something to be envied, Mr. Jackson, the independence you enjoy.’

‘It has drawbacks,’ replied he. ‘A man must always be fighting, and holding his own against encroachment, and that’s not always pleasant. Didn’t you yourself tell

me that in the long run one might get hardened? Don't you remember when you said something of the kind the night we met, on the way to Aunt Robby's? I hope you observe that your lessons aren't altogether thrown away.'

Judith blushed deeply.

'I remember it well,' she said. 'I was very rude then, and I've been sorry ever since. I spoke without thought, and without kindness, and I've often wished, and never dared, to say once more, I beg your pardon for it.'

She held out her hand; he took it, and their eyes met.

A sudden longing assailed Ambrose, a longing to throw all his prudence and calculation, and worldly-minded policy to the winds, to follow the generous impulse of his heart, to kneel at Judith's feet and claim her for his own. His eye shone

bright, his grasp tightened upon her fingers, and for a moment the happiness of two lives hung in the balance.

Before a word could pass his lips, well-known voices were heard only a few yards off.

‘Clementina, my love.’

‘Here I am, Lizzie dearest, quite close to you.’

Ambrose stifled a malediction, and realizing the full extent of the danger that threatened them, if Judith was discovered in his company by these bitter women, drew her into the darkest corner he could find. There they stood side by side, and Ambrose felt his companion trembling violently.

‘Courage,’ he whispered, ‘they shall not see *you* whatever happens.’

In a minute or so the watchers saw the capitalist’s lean and ugly daughters just in front of them.

‘You must be mistaken, Lizzie,’ continued the younger. ‘What could he be doing here?’

‘Mistaken!’ snapped Elizabeth Tucker. ‘D’ye think I’m a fool. I’d know young Jackson’s voice anywhere. I bet a crown he’s come to this place to meet some woman or other.’

‘Oh, Lizzie, I thought he was the most proper young man.’

‘More stupid you,’ was the sharp retort. ‘Surely you don’t believe *him* immaculate. I know better.’

Ambrose, in his anger, pressed Judith’s hand, which he had retained in his, so tightly that she nearly cried out; then, recollecting himself, he raised it to his lips, and whispered an apology.

‘I wonder who she can be,’ said Clementina.

‘We’ll find out,’ said the other. ‘She’ll

have to leave the town, I promise you. The hussy ! Look about, Clem, my love. They must be somewhere near.'

'Hush, or we shall be overheard,' was the answer ; and the sisters pursued their search in silence.

'Hyænas,' muttered Ambrose, 'they'll search every inch of the ground.'

Judith was crying piteously.

'Cheer up, my dear Miss Topham,' said Ambrose ; 'I promised they should not see you, and I'll keep my word. Have you presence of mind enough to obey orders ?'

'Yes,' answered Judith, plucking up courage at his confident tone.

'Sooner or later,' said he, 'these old hags will find us here. The moment they do I'll hold them fast, and you run home with all your might. Luckily the moon is clouded ; and if you will let me pull your hood close over your face you won't be known.'

‘I’m terrified,’ said Judith, ‘but I’ll do what you tell me. Thanks, a thousand thanks.’

‘For what?’ asked he; ‘for getting you into this fine scrape? Now, here they come again. Courage! This will be something to laugh at to-morrow.’

‘They must be here,’ said Elizabeth Tucker.

She and her sister stood with their backs to Ambrose.

‘Now!’ he whispered to Judith.

Judith fled.

‘There goes somebody,’ cried Elizabeth, starting in pursuit.

But Ambrose advanced, and laid his hand upon her arm, at the same time standing before Clementina and barring the passage.

‘Good-evening, Miss Tucker,’ he said.

The sisters’ rage proved that they had failed to identify the fugitive.

‘Let me go, Mr. Jackson,’ cried Elizabeth. ‘Stand aside at once.’

‘I’m sorry,’ replied he, gravely, ‘to detain a lady. Miss Clementina, I really can’t allow you to pass either. You must yield to the fortune of war.’

‘We’ll find out,’ hissed Elizabeth, pale with fury.

‘I doubt that,’ replied Jackson, quietly.

‘How long are you going to keep us here in this cowardly manner, sir?’ demanded Elizabeth.

‘Only a minute or two,’ said he, politely. ‘I’m sorry to proceed to such extremes.’

The sisters deigned no reply. Before long, Ambrose, sure that Judith was beyond pursuit, ironically wished his enemies good-night, raised his hat, and went to the club.

‘How I hate that man,’ gasped Elizabeth. ‘We’ll be even with him some day.’

‘We’ll be even with him,’ echoed Clementina. ‘Lizzie, my love, what is this on the grass?’

It was a pocket-handkerchief, with the initials, J. T. in the corner. Elizabeth’s triumph knew no bounds.

‘I shall like to see the expression of Miss Judith’s face when I return her this,’ she said.

‘It will be a treat indeed,’ said Clem. ‘Fancy it’s being Judith. Do you suppose there was really any harm, Lizzie?’

‘Harm!’ sneered the moral Miss Tucker, ‘not a bit. The girl’s too great a simpleton. But that’s only my private belief. Others might think differently if the story of this meeting should happen to spread. If we play our cards well, Clem, young Jackson, with all his high and mighty notions, will have to marry Judith, who hasn’t got a penny.’

‘But they might be happy, together, Lizzie. If he loves her——’

‘Don’t be a fool, sister,’ replied Elizabeth. ‘Jackson looks for a wife with money and position; but, before the month’s end, he shall propose to Judith Topham, who has neither, and she’ll jump at the offer. Now let us be going home, Clem.’

And the amiable couple directed their steps to the town.

Meanwhile, Judith had reached her home safely, and found that everybody had gone to bed except her mother. Mrs. Topham was awaiting her anxiously, but asked no question as to the reason of such a late return, which she put down to a most excusable fit of temper. She felt guilty at having taken part with her husband against Judith. Besides, her heart smote her for keeping secret Peter’s new

scheme, and she was almost afraid to speak for fear of letting fall what weighed so heavily on her mind. Judith was only too glad to avoid inquiry, and, as soon as possible, escaped to her room. Here, before long, she discovered the loss of her handkerchief, and, guessing where she had dropped it, spent a sleepless night in consequence.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DIPLOMATIC VISIT.

LITTLE Mr. James Tweedy had slept badly too, and when he came down to breakfast was as cross as a bear. His wife, who knew to a nicety when it was safe to find fault with him, decided that there would be a risk in doing so just now ; but determined to give him a piece of her mind when he had had some tea. So she filled his cup with a weak, yellow-looking beverage, and handed him the toast. But James was not softened by these *petits soins* ; on the contrary, he began to complain.

‘The tea is half cold, and altogether undrinkable. And the toast is burnt as black as my hat.’ And he rang the bell violently, and much to the maid’s astonishment, for she generally received her orders from Mrs. Tweedy, peremptorily demanded a fresh supply of both.

‘You’re very irritable this morning, James,’ said his wife, thinking that after all it was high time for her to exert her authority.

‘Irritable! who could be anything else? Since two o’clock that child has been screaming. Bawl! bawl! bawl! I shall cut the whole thing one of these days.’

At this unmanly threat of desertion Mrs. Tweedy changed colour, and gulped down a rising sob. What had upset James? Certainly not the children, or he would be always upset.

‘I’m sorry you were disturbed,’ she said,

‘the child is ailing. I suffered the same inconvenience as yourself.’

‘You didn’t,’ retorted James. ‘You slept through it all; though I nudged you with my elbow, you still went on snoring.’

‘I don’t snore,’ said Mrs. Tweedy. ‘It’s rude and unkind of you to say so. I wish we had never met, I wish we had never been married.’

‘Amen,’ said her husband.—‘Ah, here’s the tea, thank goodness.’

Mrs. Tweedy had now no resource but tears.

‘I don’t want to be cross,’ said James, somewhat mollified, and perhaps a little afraid, ‘but this life is unendurable. One never gets anything fit to eat, and the house is like a pigstye.’

‘I do—my—best,’ sobbed his wife.

‘You haven’t any time to do anything, it seems, Mrs. Tweedy, except to receive

visits from that fellow Captain Handcock.'

The murder was out. It was not squalling, and bad tea and toast, that ailed the little gentleman; he was suffering from a sharp attack of jealousy.

His wife sprang to arms.

'Perhaps you'd like to forbid him the house, and publish your folly to the town,' said she.

'I'll thrash him,' said Tweedy, thinking of the ash plant which Cris Parry had recommended under certain circumstances.

'You daren't,' said his wife. But he looked so fierce that she almost disbelieved her own words.

It was singularly unfortunate that James Tweedy's explosion was not deferred for a few days, when the irritating cause would have ceased to exist. Captain Handcock, who could not yet satisfy himself of the wisdom of securing one of

Nicholas Tucker's daughters, had lately been devoting himself a good deal to Mrs. Tweedy. His fancy was taken by the lively, pretty woman, and he visited her so often that at length she herself became not so much alarmed as bored. The captain's fine phrases and set compliments grew wearisome by repetition. She had decided to say 'not at home' to his next visit, and to let herself be seen at the window, a hint which the gallant soldier would perhaps be intelligent enough to understand. But her husband's ill-timed jealousy altered the position of affairs. Kate determined she would not be dictated to, it pained her to think she could be suspected, and, without reflecting how natural suspicion was, she resolved to punish James for his cruelty. And when about eleven o'clock the visitor's bell rang, she made sure it was Captain

Handcock, and went down to receive him.

But her visitor proved to be Ambrose Jackson.

Mrs. Tweedy welcomed him cordially, but could not help appearing rather surprised. Ambrose had several times visited her in his mother's company, but had never before paid her the compliment on his own account. Mrs. Tweedy, though she thought him inclined to be exclusive and to give himself airs, liked the young politician. He was handsome, and a manly fellow. He had already achieved that portion of success which is such a recommendation, especially with women; and gave promise of still higher things. It had lately transpired (not without his connivance) that he looked forward to representing the borough some day, and Mrs. Tweedy felt sure that a man of his stamp would end by carrying his point. It would

be quite a feather in her cap if she could ally herself with such an important personage, and Mrs. Tweedy settled that he should have James's vote when the proper time came. She could not help suspecting, however, that Ambrose had some special object in this visit; nor was she mistaken. But she was made to serve his purpose without finding out what it was.

The object Ambrose had in view was this.

On the previous night several circumstances had conspired to throw the cautious young man off his guard. He was fagged with his work in hot, dusty London; and the quiet streets of the little country town, and the calm of the summer twilight, had cast their spell over him. Then he had been an involuntary witness of Judith's distress, and it had softened him towards her. This was by no means all.

Her beauty, her flattering reliance on him, his admiration for her character; had nearly led him to the commission of what he regarded half-an-hour later as an act of sheer insanity. He had been on the verge of proposing to 'provincial' Judith Topham. He almost shuddered to think that at this moment, but for a chance interruption, he would be under a life-long obligation—the death-blow to his future. The peril escaped had, however, done one good thing for him, it had opened his eyes to the real state of his feeling for Judith. He now frankly owned to himself that he loved her well. But Ambrose never doubted that he would be able to overcome this weakness. The foes he had hitherto mastered had been foes from without; he had never been a man of divided counsels, and had yet to discover how dangerous can be the foe from within.

Ambrose, as he walked to the club after leaving Judith, blessed his good luck, and resolved to strictly avoid all further intimacy. Luckily Judith had not been recognised by those termagants, the Tucker women, and so no great mischief had been done.

Mischief had been done, for all that, and Ambrose, on entering the club, felt that he was the subject of conversation, and caught the name of Topham. He was intensely vexed, and, refusing to 'make up a fourth,' went off in high dudgeon.

Clearly something must be undertaken to check the spread of this report, which would mortify Judith; and perhaps even cause her to think him in earnest. Ambrose decided to circulate a contradictory statement, and could find no better means of communication between himself and Baybridge than that good-natured chatter-box, Kate Tweedy.

He called in the morning so as to see her alone.

Mrs. Tweedy would, if he only allowed her to talk, sooner or later mention the Tophams. Then he would leave no doubt as to his intentions, or rather his want of intentions, regarding Judith. He enquired after Mrs. Tweedy's children. This was like opening a sluice, and a torrent poured forth immediately.

‘Thank you, Mr. Jackson,’ she replied, ‘on the whole, I have reason to be thankful. But there are ups and downs in a large family, as you can guess. Only yesterday I came home to find that Nora and Dora were holding Augusta . . . my third child, Mr. Jackson . . . under the pump; mere frolic, but it shows what children are. I gave them both a sound whipping, and resigned myself to the certainty that Gussie would have a fearful cold and sore throat this

morning. Not a bit of it. Quite a remarkable child! Mr. Jackson. Such a constitution! Really, she has had some wonderful escapes.'

'Ah, indeed,' said Ambrose, seeing that some expression of sympathy was expected.

'Of course such things shouldn't happen,' continued Mrs. Tweedy, 'but they *are* happening constantly. The servants are so careless, you can't imagine. There's not a trustworthy servant to be had; you may give them any wages, and find them in caps and aprons, and treat them almost as if they belonged to the family, and yet they—will —not—work.'

Mrs. Tweedy accompanied each of her last words with a separate tap on the table, as if to give weight to this deplorable truth in social science. Had anyone else been sitting beside her, she would probably

have tapped him with her pretty fingertips; but she was rather afraid of Ambrose.

‘Servants,’ she went on, ‘are the great problem of housekeeping. I often think, when I see a young girl so bent upon having an establishment of her own, “Ah, if you but knew, my dear.” That’s precisely what I said the day before yesterday to Judith, that’s Mr. Topham’s elder daughter, you know.’

It was not by chance that Mrs. Tweedy spoke of Judith. She drank in every rumour that was afloat, and was dying with curiosity to know whether Ambrose was going to take any important step. Nothing would please her better than to receive the confidences of both parties, and to smooth down the course of true love—for she knew Mr. Topham’s objection to Ambrose. In case the latter wanted somebody sympathetic to confide in . . . unlikely

enough, were it not that love works wonders . . . she afforded him this opportunity, and as she spoke watched his face with attention.

Ambrose understood her, and saw that no direct denial of interest in Judith would hold. So he said,

‘The elder Miss Topham, yes ; perhaps you know that I’m a great admirer of hers ?’

‘I have heard of something of the kind,’ murmured Mrs. Tweedy in an inviting whisper.

‘So shrewd and sensible,’ said Ambrose. ‘Wasn’t there some talk of an engagement between her and Mr. Sutton ?’

This remark was the result of a sudden inspiration. Ambrose never dreamed of any such possibility, or for Judith’s sake he would have held his tongue. But the question would prove his indifference, he

imagined. His words certainly surprised Mrs. Tweedy.

‘Mr. Sutton,’ she exclaimed, ‘I never caught a syllable about that. He’s much too old.’

‘Then please don’t quote me,’ insisted Ambrose, feeling that it was much more difficult to deal with women than with men, and that he had got out of his depth in making any allusion to Will Sutton at all.

‘Oh, dear, no,’ said Mrs. Tweedy. ‘I’m discretion itself. I never heard Mr. Sutton’s name mentioned. Would you be very much offended if I told you my version, that is, the version which has reached me?’

‘Offended, Mrs. Tweedy? Why should I be offended? How can it concern me?’

‘It does concern you; but you’d be vexed if I . . .’

‘Please?’ requested Ambrose.

‘*You* were said to be as good as engaged to Miss Topham.’

‘I!’ answered Ambrose. ‘I ought to feel uncommonly flattered.’

‘And so there’s really nothing in it?’ inquired Mrs. Tweedy, with a touch of disappointment in her voice.

‘Nothing whatever, I assure you. Miss Topham and I are friends, that is all. As for me, I’m far too busy a man——’

The lady shook her head.

‘Forgive me, Mr. Jackson, but I have too much experience to believe that a man can’t find time to give his heart away. I confess that I myself thought you were struck with Judith, of whom I have the very highest opinion. But I see that it’s the old story, the luxury cannot be afforded; you look for more than she, poor child, can offer——’

Ambrose was half tempted to say he did. It was important that Mrs. Tweedy should contradict the gossip of the place. If he let her suppose that he did look higher, she would be in the position of a prophet who knows what is going to happen, and, on the strength of his assurance, would pooh-pooh the idea of the match wherever she went. In an evil moment he replied :

‘ I didn’t quite say that, Mrs. Tweedy.’

This was enough. She had got her cue. That she looked upon the affair in the light he wished was evident from the manner in which she praised Judith, much as if she were pleading her cause. Ambrose listened gravely, directed the conversation into another channel, and, as soon as possible, took leave.

He had gained his object, and yet could not be altogether satisfied with his visit. He knew that he might long seek for as

good a woman as Judith. But in the matter of worldly advantages . . . not necessarily of money, for Ambrose was not mercenary, but of birth and distinguished connections . . . Ambrose thought her below his standard. He had thought so many a time. To have said so, however, was a deep humiliation to him, and he felt that he had spoken of his relations to Judith to a third person in an unwarrantable manner. It never occurred to him that Mrs. Tweedy, in her most careless moment, would repeat that part of their conversation. Still he was filled with a vague misgiving, which, even after he had gone back to London, haunted him for some days.

CHAPTER XIV.

A QUIET DINNER.

MR. TOPHAM had overcome his wife's opposition to his new undertaking with less difficulty than he had expected; and his spirits were higher even than usual. The family lawyer, Mr. Slade, might make himself as disagreeable as he chose, and there was every probability of his doing so; but Mr. Topham knew from experience that in the long run Mr. Slade would have to give in. Maria had a right to dispose of the money, and with protestation and delay the lawyer's power to prevent its re-investment ended.

It was Judith of whom her father stood most in awe. Her influence over her mother, exerted in the cause of prudence, would be more than equal to his, exerted in the cause of speculation. Let her once obtain a hint of what was going on, and farewell to his El Dorado. Yet, in spite of his dread, he could not help now and then a covert allusion to the good times coming, and Judith would to a certainty have fathomed his designs, had she not been engrossed with her own troubles and prospects.

Until lately, Judith had never allowed herself to hope about Ambrose. She understood thoroughly his opinions on getting on in the world. That he liked her she had never doubted ; but, until their meeting by the river, she never thought a proposal from him possible. Now she saw that such a possibility did exist, but with

the thrill of delight which this discovery caused was mingled a dim foreboding that he might ask her to be his wife, and yet consider himself making a sacrifice for her sake. Judith loved him passionately. But in the depths of a heart which seemed incapable of a single selfish desire she firmly resolved that she would never stand in his way, that she would, no matter at what cost to herself, refuse love on such terms. Pride gave strength to this resolve. She was not going to accept a man who should come implying, 'I might have married a woman wealthy and nobly born, but, for love's sake, be mine.' No, Judith had too much self-respect for that.

Her distress was increased by the malice of the Baybridge busy-bodies, foremost in whose ranks stood those lean, unsavoury spinsters, the Misses Tucker. Elizabeth had promised herself a rare triumph on

returning Judith's handkerchief found by the river. Judith, who had had time to prepare for the attack, shook off the poisonous arrow with disdainful ease. When Elizabeth, after much parade and mystery, produced her piece of evidence, the young girl laughingly thanked her, supposed she must have 'dropped the handkerchief the night before while talking to Mr. Jackson,' and was 'so glad to get back her lost property—so kind of Miss Tucker.' Worst-ed in this encounter, Elizabeth, more bitter than ever, went about letting fall half-veiled hints, some of which were brought by kind friends to Judith. Judith pretended to ignore them, and suffered in silence.

One morning, towards the end of August, her father surprised her by announcing that he intended to entertain a few friends at a quiet dinner, and told her to write

the invitations from a list which he had drawn out. He explained that he wished to make at least some return for the hospitality he and his family enjoyed.

Judith's suspicions were at once aroused; for her father's Utopian schemes usually began in this fashion; 'First catch your hare and then cook it,' was a proverb neglected by Peter. She hurried to her mother, who (Heaven forgive the poor woman!) solemnly denied that anything unusual was going to happen. Judith then raised an objection on the score of expense, but, when she observed that Ambrose Jackson's name was on the list, she began to think that the affair might be managed, and, secretly resolving to sell her last good ornament, set to work. Ambrose was, she had heard from his mother, the most particular diner-out; he should have no cause to grumble with her enter-

tainment. A day was fixed, the invitations were sent, and in due course accepted.

The day came; the resources of the establishment were taxed to the uttermost, and, when at last the family was assembled in the drawing-room, Judith was justified in hoping that everything would pass off smoothly.

Mrs. Robertson soon appeared, attended by Will Sutton. Nicholas Tucker, quite unaffected by the absence of his daughters, followed, in company with the melancholy Dr. Stevens.

‘My dear Mrs. Topham,’ said Aunt Robby, ‘here I am, a model of punctuality, and looking forward to thorough enjoyment. Mr. Parry, how do you do, sir? you never come near me now. Well, we must excuse you, you have better employment, I daresay. Annie, you must spare me a kiss. Judith, you too, you’re looking very handsome, child.’

‘Please don’t make her vain,’ said Mr Topham, from the hearth-rug.

‘Mrs. Robertson,’ said Nicholas, ‘this is a pleasure. No return of the rheumatism, I hope?’

‘Thank you. Not this weather, Mr. Tucker.’

‘It won’t last,’ said Dr. Stevens, alluding to the weather. Dr. Stevens was a prophet of evil.

‘Doctor,’ said Mr. Topham, ‘I don’t go with you there. The weather will remain *in statu quo* for the next fortnight. Not that I understand these matters, but some of my predictions have been fortunate—— Ah, here come Mrs. and Mr. Tweedy.’

Mrs. Tweedy strutted up the room, and her husband trod softly in her footsteps.

‘Doctor,’ said Nicholas, ‘how is Mrs. Yonge?’

‘Dying,’ said the doctor.

‘You don’t say so. Sad, indeed. How is her son-in law?’

‘Nasty fracture,’ said the doctor. ‘I expect serious complications.’

‘When shall I get rid of my sciatica, I wonder?’ asked the capitalist, not above saving a fee.

‘Don’t be too sanguine,’ replied Dr. Stevens. ‘I’ve known men in your case . . . well, I won’t say exactly crippled . . .’

‘Do you think, Tucker, that Danvers is at last going to give up his seat?’ said James Tweedy.

‘James,’ said his wife, ‘no politics before dinner, I beg.’

‘My dear——’ protested the little man, in great confusion.

‘Mr. Tweedy,’ said Judith, leaving Will Sutton to come to the rescue, ‘I hope you’ve kept your word, and brought a song or two. We are not going to let you off.’

‘Whom are we waiting for, Maria?’ asked Peter Topham, in a stage whisper.

‘The Jacksons,’ whispered his wife in return. ‘They will be here in one moment, Peter.’

‘Hope the young fellow won’t be late,’ said he; ‘I don’t like people who give themselves airs.’

The Jacksons were announced.

Ambrose had not met Judith since their adventure by the river. As he shook her hand she blushed deeply, a fact noticed by several observant pairs of eyes, especially by Will Sutton’s. There was even an answering flush on Ambrose’s dark cheek, and his rival noticed that his lips were firmly pressed together. Ambrose had thought of not coming, and he had a previous engagement in London which he could have pleaded in excuse, but he yielded to his mother’s entreaty. Besides, to

stay away might, under the circumstances, have occasioned more remark than his appearance. He could show by his behaviour during the evening that there was nothing between him and Judith. It pained him, it went against him, to be cold and unbending to the girl. But it was necessary. With a suppressed sigh he began to carry out his programme.

Ambrose took Judith in to dinner. She knew by instinct that the reports which had long tormented her had reached him at last, and looked up in his face with an almost piteous appeal.

The host, with a genial smile, crooked his arm for Aunt Robby; his wife tried to bear up against Nicholas and his batteries of questions. Cris and Annie paired off demurely, and indulged in sly little jokes between themselves. Will Sutton found a lively companion in Mrs. Tweedy, and did

not mind how much she chattered as long as he could look at Judith opposite. James, in the absence of a certain Miss Plumstead who had sent an excuse the last thing, wished himself at home, no, at the club. Mrs. Jackson fell to the lot of Dr. Stevens.

Conversation was not likely to flag with such good talkers as Mrs. Tweedy and Nicholas, and such good listeners as their hostess and Will Sutton. Even the doctor was infected by the almost general spirit of good-humour, and told an anecdote about a glass eye. The anecdote, delivered in a tone almost sepulchral, and redolent of the shop, was not brought forth without many pauses and jerks, and did not, when evolved, appear to have any particular bearing. But the melancholy man's virtuous intention was appreciated, and a tribute of laughter and thanks wait-

ed on the conclusion of his unwonted labours.

Judith and her neighbour alone were uncomfortable and ill at ease. Ambrose refused to be light-hearted and gay. Judith began, civilly,

‘It was so good of you to come all the way from town, Mr. Jackson.’

‘Not at all. It has given me great pleasure,’ was the formal answer.

‘It must be very hot in London,’ was Judith’s next attempt.

‘Very,’ said Ambrose.

‘Is there much going on?’ asked Judith.

‘Not much. Hardly anything, in fact.’

But Mr. Jackson, though he forced himself to be formal, was not going to be ill-mannered. So he told Judith what little news there was, and kept the ball rolling after a fashion. Then he mentioned that he was to have a holiday, and proposed

taking his mother to one of the watering-places.

Judith divined his meaning: that they were not to meet so often. She was disheartened. Trouble loomed at least for her in the future, but to-night she had meant to enjoy herself and to please him . . . though it should be for the last time. She would not be put down; she laughed, talked, listened, smiled, and practised all the harmless arts of an untutored and unconventional girl. He remained adamant. Bending towards him at length, she ventured,

‘I was found out the other night, Mr. Jackson.’

He was busy with his plate.

‘I hope you suffered no inconvenience, Miss Topham. I owe you an apology for what happened on that occasion.’

Judith tried to answer; but faltered,

and almost broke down. She felt herself rebuked for this last bold attempt, and in her turn kept silence till her mother gave the signal for the ladies to withdraw.

‘Mr. Jackson,’ she then said, lowering her voice, ‘you have taken such pains to amuse me that I presume to ask a favour.’

He bit his lip, and bowed gravely.

‘Please don’t talk politics with my father.’

‘I will avoid the subject if possible,’ said Ambrose.

‘Judith,’ said Aunt Robby, confidentially, as they reached the drawing-room, ‘I never sat down to a better dinner. The most exacting man couldn’t find a fault. Come, child, devote yourself to me. I’ve the most important business in hand. I’m going to be extravagant in my old age, and order two new gowns, and I want your advice.’

Judith willingly consented.

Her mother and Mrs. Jackson were seated on a sofa at the other end of the room, out of hearing of their companions.

‘How handsome your elder daughter does look to-night,’ said the latter. ‘I always admired her; but just now she seems more attractive than ever,—though a little sad, perhaps. What goodness is written on her face.’

‘Yes, I’m very proud of Jue,’ answered Mrs. Topham, gently. ‘And you, Mrs. Jackson, must be proud of your son. He is so strong and clever; and so good to you—ah, I see that in a thousand ways.’

‘He is,’ replied the other, well pleased. ‘Ambrose has his failings; but with them all he has a tender heart. He loves me, who can say how well. But I can’t hope to keep that love always; some day I must be contented to share it with another.’

Who will she be ? My dear Mrs. Topham, I wish that I might choose.'

'Perhaps our choice——' began Judith's mother timidly.

There was no need to say more. A quick pressure of the hand did better than words. From that moment the match-making mothers became ardent conspirators for the welfare of their children ; though, later on, circumstances interfered with their sympathy.

A long time passed, and the gentlemen, selfish creatures, did not appear. Mrs. Tweedy had given her husband instructions on the subject, and, by way of reminding him of them, smartly struck two or three chords on the piano. The sound penetrated to the dining-room, and had the desired effect.

But, when the gentlemen did appear, it was at once evident, at least to Judith,

that things had not gone on well in their absence. Her father, whose face was rarely seen without a smile, was positively scowling. Ambrose Jackson looked very grave.

‘I say, Cris,’ whispered Annie, ‘what *has* happened?’

‘Happened,’ drawled Cris, in an undertone. ‘Your father and Jackson have had a stand-up fight about our glorious Constitution. I’ve been bored, horribly bored. Let’s come and sit on the lawn, Annie.’

‘If you wrap me up very nicely,’ said Annie; ‘who knows, I may.’

Meanwhile, Aunt Robby beckoned to Ambrose.

‘Mr. Jackson,’ she said, ‘I want some information.’

‘With pleasure,’ was the reply.

‘I take a great interest in Baybridge, as you know. Please explain to me how

parties in the borough will be affected if Sir Hugh retires.'

'That can be done in a few words, Mrs. Robertson. Conservatives and Liberals will be fairly balanced, and the decision of the constituency will be undoubtedly in the hands of a small Third Party.'

'Made up of?' asked the old lady.

'Small proprietors and shop-keepers.'

'And it is their votes that you hope to win when the time comes?'

He bowed.

'How?' said Aunt Robby.

'Pardon me,' answered Ambrose, 'if for the present I keep my own counsel.'

'Ah! you young men think yourselves so clever now-a-days. Take care. A great many of this party are my friends. I have lived many years and spent my money among them. I have been a friend in need, and a friend indeed. I have employed local

people exclusively. They would do much to oblige me.'

'Doubtless,' said Ambrose, 'they are personally attached to you. But they will probably look more to the future than to the past, and support that candidate who would be able and willing to serve them best.—But,' continued Ambrose, who never threw a chance away, 'I hope for your good offices, Mrs. Robertson?'

'I shall see, sir, how you behave,' answered the old dame, in an irritable voice. 'I'm not altogether satisfied with you. Go and talk to Miss Topham now; don't you see she's quite alone?'

Judith was sitting alone on the ottoman; Will Sutton, who would otherwise have been at her side, being monopolized by Mrs. Tweedy, from whom he in vain tried to escape. Judith looked so dejected, and at the same time so beautiful, that Ambrose,

conscious of having sinned against her wishes in the after-dinner affray, was for making amends. Nor was she proof against the voice and the manner that she loved, and soon they were enjoying each other's society as if there had never been a cloud between them.

He had an eye to business notwithstanding.

‘Please do something for me, Miss Topham,’ he said. ‘Mrs. Robertson may be of some slight service to me later on in connection with the borough. You are a favourite of hers. Remember to say something in my favour.’

‘I will see how you behave,’ said Judith, archly; holding up her finger, and curiously enough using Aunt Robby's words.

Ambrose was taken aback by the answer; but a call for some music relieved him from his embarrassment.

James Tweedy was the first performer ; as he sang well, his wife was for once content to let him do as he pleased. Next, Annie was led in from the lawn by her father, and, looking very shy and pretty, warbled a ditty, while Cris turned over the leaves. Mrs. Tweedy played some rattling dance music.

Then Judith sang ' Barbara Allen.'

She had practised a more difficult song, so that Ambrose might hear her at her best. But, fortunately, her courage failed at the last moment ; she took up the familiar ballad, and sang it with simplicity and genuine feeling.

A long silence ensued. Nobody asked for any more music. Her audience seemed unwilling to break the charm she had thrown over them.

' Thank you, my dear,' said Aunt Robby, at length. ' I could listen for ever. But

it has quite spoilt my spirits for all that. Mr. Tucker, will you revive them by taking me for a turn out of doors?’

Nicholas fetched a warm shawl, and the active old lady’s example was followed by everyone else.

Ambrose wrapped Judith up, too, almost tenderly, she thought; and led her down the garden.

‘I can never listen to a good song unmoved,’ he said. ‘Nothing has such a power over me as that.’

‘But then you expect perfection,’ said Judith.

‘No; I like a trained voice, I allow. But a natural manner is the chief thing.’

‘Do I sing naturally?’ asked Judith.

He laughed.

‘As a bird. And you do something else very naturally too,—ask leading questions.’

‘It’s all very well for you to scold me,’

said Judith; 'but what do you deserve for quarrelling with my father? Oh, Mr. Jackson, didn't you promise?'

'Not absolutely,' he pleaded. 'Honestly, I am not to blame. I tried hard to avoid the subject. You've no idea how patient I was, to obey you. Your father persisted, and in the end advocated such extraordinary measures that I—really—Well, well, I'm very sorry if I quarrelled with him. There's one person I'll never quarrel with.'

'Is her name Judith?' asked the girl.

'Another leading question,' said Ambrose. 'Her name *is* Judith. I'll never quarrel with her——'

'Again,' said Judith, finishing the sentence for him . . . 'What a lovely night it is,' she added, after a pause. 'Look, from here we can see the river winding round the foot of the hill. How delightful the

air is. I never knew a more pleasant night.'

'Nor I,' murmured Ambrose, stooping to look into her eyes.

So they talked on, and Mrs. Topham came to tell her daughter that their guests were going.

As he went home, Ambrose reflected that he had not altogether succeeded in carrying out his programme.

CHAPTER XV.

MORE DIPLOMACY.

THERE is something very painful to the elderly man in the tacit understanding by virtue of which he is doomed to exclusion not from the society but from the fellowship of the younger people. On the night of Peter Topham's dinner-party Will Sutton had suffered from this cause. He was, as far as his company went, neither one thing nor the other. He was not yet old enough (certainly not in his manner of thinking and feeling) to consort willingly with the staid married folk. On the other hand, he had no longer that elastic faith

in all the good things of life, that freedom from disappointment and dead enthusiasm which pours into young and untried hearts so much of the spirit of brotherhood.

Will felt aggrieved. He had been obliged to 'take a back seat' during the whole of the proceedings, and not even Mrs. Tweedy's confidential disclosures about her household affairs could reconcile him to misfortune. Discontented and moody, he had increased the evil of which he complained. He had meant, for Judith's sake, to be bright and talkative, and had signally failed. This he attributed to the unwelcome presence of Ambrose Jackson, of whom he was at last excessively jealous. Will had lost his temper on seeing the attention his rival received from Judith.

Will decided that he must do something. He had patience; he could wait for the day

when it would be safe for him to ask for Judith's love. But he was not going to let the grass grow under his feet. He had no intention of resigning without a struggle that dear prize on which his heart had so long been set. There was danger. He had changed his opinion regarding Ambrose; he still thought that the young politician, if he ever married Judith, would later on bitterly regret taking the step; but he now believed it possible that Ambrose, in spite of his prudence, and caution, and selfishness, might be hurried by Judith's beauty and grace into some position from which he could not in honour recede.

What could he do at this crisis ?

It struck him that he was not seen at his best in Baybridge. He was quite another man on his estate. Why not propose a day's excursion into Surrey, and let

Judith see him in this new character?

Property has always been a veritable salvation to the middle-aged man, often a broad and smooth highway leading to the altar. After all, Will had the pull here; why not take advantage of it?

Not for one moment did loyal Will Sutton do the woman he loved the injustice of supposing that she would of her own free will yield to the influence of position and affluence. But he knew that in such cases the mind often receives a bias unconsciously, and he foresaw many advantages which might spring from Judith's visit to Radalls. Judith's present straitened circumstances at Baybridge would make Will's well-appointed establishment doubly impressive. She could not help hearing, too, that he was respected in the county, and much liked by his dependants. And, if Will's hopes should at last dawn upon

her, the thought of the comforts her mother might enjoy in her old age through such a union would, to one of Judith's disposition, be a powerful argument. This last consideration was certainly rather *infra dig.* from the romantic point of view; but a middle-aged lover catches thankfully at every straw. The plan, on the whole, promised so much that Will naturally wondered he had not thought of it before.

An excuse for the excursion was hardly necessary.

One afternoon, the sisters were sitting in their garden, when Will joined them, and threw himself down on the grass near Judith, saying:—

‘Judith, I’ve a proposal to make to you.’

The girls burst out laughing.

‘O, take care, Will!’ said Annie. ‘The first time Cris said that, I answered, “Yes, please,” and the poor boy was done for.—Wasn’t he, Jumper dear?’

Jumper, dozing in his mistress's lap, wagged his tail as if he understood all about it.

Will felt as though somebody had given him a stab. Never mind,—a day would come when a proposal from him to Judith, should not seem altogether so absurd. Judith, though she had no idea of what was in his mind, saw that he was vexed; and asked what new treat he had in store for them. Thus encouraged, Will suggested that they should make a day's excursion to Radalls. The invitation of course included their parents; but, as Will had foreseen, the party eventually consisted only of Judith and himself, Annie and Cris Parry.

They started very early next day, and took the train to Croydon. On arriving there, they had about two miles to drive before reaching Radalls.

‘Now then, Will,’ said Annie, ‘I don’t see your carriage and pair.’

Will had understood that parade would not serve him with Judith.

‘Carriage and pair, Annie?’ he said, ‘you forget that we’re excursionists, and can expect only a hot walk and sandwiches at the end of it.’

‘Walk!’ exclaimed Mr. Parry; ‘walk two miles in August! Hang it all, Sutton, you surely can’t mean a fellow to drag up these hills of yours with the thermometer at I don’t know where?’

‘Cheer up, Parry,’ laughed Will, ‘I see a pony-chaise over there that looks as if it had come from Radalls. It will just hold four, and I’ll drive.’

Mr. Parry did cheer up, and the little party was soon jogging on merrily towards Will’s home.

‘Here’s the pond,’ cried Judith soon,

‘just as it used to be, Annie. Here are the cross-roads. I hope the old cottages half-way up the hill haven’t been pulled down?’

‘No,’ replied Will, ‘I set my face against such Vandalism. They are still there, the picturesque, tumble-down places, with their bee-hives and tall hollyhocks.’

They passed the cottages, the inmates came out as a matter of course, and everyone had a ‘Good-day’ for Will. Never had Judith seen him looking so bright and happy. One woman thanked him for this, another for that, and a sturdy, golden-haired urchin inquired when the promised rocking-horse was coming. Even lazy Cris was roused into saying,

‘Nice to have a lot of people attached to you, and so on, eh, Sutton? Wish I was a landowner myself.’

After a steep climb the ponies reached

the lodge, which was covered with ivy, and while the gardener's wife, after a low curtsey, was opening the gates, there was time to admire the view towards Sydenham. Over the hills, green and brown with their coats of heather, dotted here and there with a patch of gravel or a Scotch fir, the girls saw in the distance, flashing in the midsummer sun, the high towers and domes of the Crystal Palace.

‘Do you remember, Will,’ said Judith, ‘the last night we watched the rockets bursting over there, and saw the gardens filled with red and purple light? What a tiny thing I was then, and you, how grand and condescending you were as you lifted me on your arm.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Will, rather hastily, for retrospection marked the disparity of years between him and Judith. ‘Mrs. Warden has let us in at last,’ he added. ‘The avenue

is as rough as ever it was, so please look out for jolting everybody. I'm thinking of cutting a new road, this one is so out of repair.'

The avenue (it hardly deserved the name) ought by rights to have been ugly, for it was very straight and very narrow, but the trees which clustered up high, broken banks on each side, in their freshness and beauty made one forget the want of taste on the part of the road-maker long ago. When the end of this straight bit was reached came an open glade, with several fine oaks. Then the road grew so narrow that there was not too much room even for the pony-chaise, and the driver's whip was brushed by the hanging branches of a thicket of moss-roses. The ponies quickened their pace, the scene widened suddenly, and they drew up at the hall-door.

Radalls was by common consent a dear old house ; but not even Will himself could say to what order of architecture it belonged. It had a central porch supported by four pillars, and a wing on each side. It was furnished soberly, with more regard to comfort than to modern ideas of appearance, and contained some valuable portraits and other pictures. Its grounds were charming. The lodge side presented a wall of green boughs, the opening of the avenue being hardly visible ; and behind the house rose a dense wood of firs. In front, a magnificent cedar filled one corner of the sloping lawn, which was adorned with three great rhododendron clumps, and shut in by a well-kept laurel hedge. On the far side also a sloping lawn with quaint wooden flower-stands, rustic arm-chairs and benches, and a summer-house. Then one of the old-fashioned

kitchen-gardens—with a particular damson, a famous fruit-bearer, which Judith still recollected. A few hundred yards from the house, on a lower level, was the Cottage, a roomy, two-storied building, built originally for the steward, but furnished (before Will's time) for an impoverished couple of the Sutton family—who had since been gathered to their fathers.

At the door Judith and her sister were welcomed by the housekeeper, Mrs. Edwards, an ancient servant in cap and spectacles, who led them to the Red-room to wash off the dust of the journey.

Will then showed his friends all over the house. When they came to the drawing-room, he said, 'This is going to be re-decorated, Judith. What colour would you like the walls to be?'

'I?' said Judith. 'I'm no judge, Will.'

But he insisted.

‘Light-blue, then,’ said Judith.

‘Light-blue it shall be,’ said Will, with much decision.

Something in his tone struck Judith, but she was puzzled as to what that something might be. Not so Annie, who now quite saw that Will hoped Judith would one day sit in that drawing-room as its mistress. After luncheon, as they were strolling in the woods, she pointed to Will and Judith, saying to Cris,

‘It’s a case, Cris.’

‘Knew that long ago, little wiseacre,’ replied Cris, in a very superior manner.

‘Then why didn’t you take me into your confidence, sir?’

‘Be—cause——’ began Cris.

‘You’re thinking of an excuse,’ said Annie.

‘No, honour bright,’ drawled Cris. ‘I wanted you to remain neutral.’

‘That means to do nothing, doesn’t it?’ asked Annie. ‘I can’t consent. Will is an old friend, and must be made happy.’

‘How about the other fellow? Bore him dreadfully,’ suggested Mr. Parry. ‘Ambrose Jackson is an old friend of mine——’

‘You mustn’t take his part against me,’ said Annie, with a pout.

‘Just what I mean. We must both be neutral.’

‘And say nothing to Judith?’

‘Not a word,’ answered Cris.

‘Very well,’ assented Annie. ‘It shall be as you please. Only remember, Cris, once we’re married I’m always to have my own way. Let’s sit down in the shade here, and you make a fan of ferns, and keep the flies off, as a punishment for not having taken me into your confidence.’

Meanwhile Judith and Will went on alone.

‘What a difference between the air here and at Baybridge,’ said the former. ‘How mother would enjoy this! Haven’t you thought her looking worn lately?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid I have,’ said Will. ‘Your father isn’t speculating again, I hope?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Judith. ‘There’s not much left to speculate with, and besides mother would warn me in time.’

‘A change would do your mother good,’ said Will. ‘Do you think that she and all of you could spend the next few months here? The house is empty, and the servants are idle, so it would make no difference in any way. As for me, I’m thinking of a trip abroad.’

‘No, Will, you’re not,’ answered his companion. ‘You’re thinking how to do us a kindness, and to pretend it isn’t a kindness. Thanks, many thanks! But it couldn’t be

managed. How happy you ought to be at Radalls, Will; I never thought the place was half so nice; or that its master was such an important local magnate—though I always knew he had a heart of gold. I wonder you don't live here more?'

His face grew sad.

'The rose is not without a thorn, Judith. I am lonely.'

'Of course you are,' replied the girl, kindly. 'Why don't you settle down. I know a certain somebody who would suit you admirably, Will.'

Though she did not dare to say so, Judith meant Mrs. Jackson. Will, who was anxiously watching the progress of Judith's portrait, had paid many visits to Helen for that reason. Judith had heard the widow speak kindly of him, and drew her own conclusions.

William Sutton groaned inwardly, to

think how utterly Judith misunderstood him. Why should it be so altogether out of the question, his love for her? He asked, as calmly as he could, who had put such ideas into her head.

‘This time no gossip is responsible. I know quite well that my old friend is in love.’

‘How?’ asked Will, feeling sick at heart.

‘Oh, Will, Will!’ cried the girl, ‘what’s the use of trying to keep a secret from your old favourite. Do you suppose I haven’t noticed your little guilty fits and starts, and your awkwardness, even when you talk to me? Ah, we women can tell.’

Will turned his head away.

‘Silence is consent, in this case conviction,’ said Judith, gaily. ‘Don’t despair, Will. I’m sure, whoever she may be, she won’t be able to resist anyone as kind as you are.’

‘I suppose you ought to know,’ said Will.

‘I beg pardon?’ faltered Judith. She had never before heard him speak in that tone, and she thought his behaviour to-day unaccountable.

‘You say, “we women can tell,”’ pursued Will, speaking in the same hurried, choked tone; ‘you can’t! I don’t believe all we hear about the intuition of women. They are said to know a lover the moment his heart burns. Nonsense! I verily believe, Judith, a man might be dying for love of you, spending and wasting his life in vain hopes, and you would never as much as know it.’

Judith burst into a merry peal of laughter. The considerate, tender-hearted girl had no idea of the pangs she was inflicting.

‘Will, Will,’ she said, ‘this isn’t fair. You are trying to turn the tables on me. Well, perhaps I’ve deserved it. You have

seen the world, you understand men, and know what they are worth. Do you think' . . . and she blushed deeply and her head drooped . . . 'that I could make him happy?'

'Him?' asked Will. 'Do you mean Ambrose Jackson? Of course you do. We're playing at cross questions and crooked answers, Judith. Where are your sister and Cris?'

It was a relief to Will to call for them aloud; but to Judith his voice sounded harsh and almost angry.

She stole up close to his side, and took his hand between both of hers.

'Will, I've offended you in some way I don't understand, hurt you, perhaps. Oh, forgive me. To-day I meant to make so much of you, and you were so kind about mother.'

He raised her fingers to his lips.

'You cannot offend me, Jue.—Here

comes the servant with cups and saucers, and everything else for tea-making. Judith, you're mistress of the ceremonies, and Cris and I will light a fire for the kettle.'

Will feared that he had said too much, and tried to make Judith forget their conversation by laughter and good-humour. But Judith's suspicion was not aroused. Will's outburst simply confirmed her opinion that he *was* thinking of Mrs. Jackson—a lover's denial must not be taken too strictly. She wished, however, that she had not spoken on the subject, and her tact would have saved her from the error if she had had any reason to believe Will was at all touchy. She did her best too to dispel the cloud that had so suddenly gathered. So the rest of the day passed to all appearance very pleasantly. The party reached Baybridge at a late hour.

Not till he was alone could Will give way to his despair. What bitter results, he thought, from the day which had promised so much. But, as the future was to prove, the visit to his home was, in some respects, not such bad diplomacy after all.

CHAPTER XVI.

COMPROMISED.

ONE morning Nicholas did not appear at breakfast. As a rule his health was good, and, even when unwell, he rarely allowed any change in his usual hours. It must have been comforting for him to reflect on the genuine affection which sprang up in his children's breasts at any prospect of his being seriously ill. Elizabeth went up to his room more than once. 'Was dear papa's tea quite to his liking?' Clementina followed suit. 'Would her Father fancy anything, would he send for Dr. Stevens, or at least tell his dearest Clem-

entina what ailed him ?' Nicholas was out of sorts, and wanted to be left alone, and clearly signified his wishes on that point.

'Clem, my love,' said Elizabeth, as they sat down to their breakfast, 'poor papa is failing, I fear.'

'I fear so, Lizzie dearest,' echoed Clem.

'I wish,' said Elizabeth, 'he would not be so close about his—er—future arrangements.'

'You mean about his will, Lizzie ?'

'What else could I be speaking of!' snapped Elizabeth. 'I sometimes think you've no sense. Yes, about the will. Of course the bulk of the property will come to me.'

'I don't see why.'

'Naturally, I'm the oldest.'

'Much,' said Clem.

Elizabeth got as red as a poppy.

'You're very spiteful this morning,

Clementina. Naturally, most of the money will be mine. Arthur and I will have a position to maintain. He is allied with the best families—so *distingué*!

‘I never paid much attention to that,’ said Clem. ‘He began by being civil to me, but I kept him at a distance. If I know Captain Handcock, he’ll not marry till he sees money down. Cash with order, he, he!’

‘Dare you say that!’ shrieked Elizabeth. ‘He never so much as looked at you, and that’s why you suggest that he loves my money, and not me. You’re envious, Clem, my love, because you haven’t got a man of your own.’

‘I’ve had as many offers as I have fingers,’ exclaimed Clementina, with some poetical license. ‘I shall have a husband one of these days—and children. You’ll never have a child, you’re too old.’

Elizabeth turned livid, and caught her sister by the sleeve.

‘Let me go,’ cried Clem. ‘I dare you to touch me! Do you hear, I dare you!’

The spinsters stood facing each other, and panted; then sat down to breakfast again.

‘There’s no good fighting,’ said Elizabeth, sullenly, after a long pause. ‘We’re alone in the world, Clem.’

‘I don’t want to fight,’ said Clementina.

‘I never meant that about your lovers, Clem. Few girls have refused such offers as you. I shall never forget John Mickle-dale, at Bath, and the way you finished him off.’

‘Didn’t I,’ said the other. ‘I was only joking about the children, Lizzie dearest; you will have a large family, I’m sure. As to dear Arthur, he fell in love with you from the first.’

Such generous mutual confessions could have but one result. The sisters embraced tearfully, and vowed to stand by each other as long as they lived.

Clementina had not spoken at random about having a husband some day. Unknown to her sister, and, as she imagined, to the old man upstairs also, she had lately been granting stolen interviews to a suitor not more disinterested than Captain Hancock. His name was Mr. Lloyd. This accomplished gentleman was getting on in life, and on the look-out, as he would have put it, 'for a gal with something of her own.' He knew that Cris would have no further need for his services when the marriage with Annie took place, and intended, if he could, to keep a lodging-house in London, where he could earn a comfortable living, and see his friends—his wife doing most of the work. He saw no

difficulty in the social gulf between himself and Clementina ; in her eagerness for a husband, she would doubtless consent to cross it. Perhaps Mr. Tucker might wink at an elopement for the sake of getting rid of Clementina on reasonable terms. That she had five thousand pounds already was well known to Mr. Lloyd, and, though he shrewdly guessed that Nicholas's wealth was vastly over-rated, he counted upon a few thousands more—perhaps he might do without the lodging-house, and retire into the elegance of private life. All things considered, Mr. Lloyd thought a little sentiment could do no harm. For him, Clementina had no biting words; even his niggardly display of affection seemed to quicken that infinitesimal germ of goodness which had led her, many years ago, to send ten pounds to the father she imagined a beggar.

Clementina breathed not a word to her dearest Lizzie on this subject. After breakfast they went out, and before long they saw Mrs. Jackson turning down High Street.

‘There she goes, into Drake’s,’ said Elizabeth, ‘to buy some more paint, I suppose. She thinks of nothing but of her daubing. By-the-by, Clem, we never found out what that picture was she made such a mystery of. As she’s out, suppose we call——’

‘And see if there happens to be anything lying about. But she’s sure to have locked the studio door as usual.’

‘We’ll have another try,’ decided Elizabeth.

Fortune favoured them. They passed quickly through the house, and the studio door stood ajar.

But to their great disappointment there

was no picture to be seen. There was the easel, the palette with the wet colours, and the mahl-stick evidently just laid down. Mrs. Jackson had been putting some finishing touches to Judith's portrait, and had suddenly found herself in want of a colour. In her hurry she had left the door open, but had not neglected to lock up the portrait in the cupboard in the wall.

'I hate suspicious people,' said Elizabeth, on making this discovery. 'If we could only light upon the key.'

Clementina had already found a key in one of the vases on the stove. She fitted it impatiently to the lock, and the cupboard door opened.

'Why!' exclaimed Elizabeth, recoiling at the sight of Mrs. Jackson's masterpiece, 'it's Judith!'

'It's Judith,' echoed Clementina.

'A pretty thing,' sneered Elizabeth, tri-

umphantly, 'to pretend he's not fond of the chit, and then to get his mother to paint her. Clem, my love, I shall like to see young Jackson's face when he hears that we know this. By the time all Bay-bridge is aware of it, too, I don't well see how he can avoid proposing.'

'He can't,' agreed Clementina.

'And it will break his pride nicely,' said Miss Tucker. 'He'll live to repent the day when he struck a woman, as he did me, down by the river. He'll find out, when he pushes his way ahead, what it is to be tacked on to a penniless girl, without any *savoir-faire*, too.'

'Not a morsel,' said Clem. 'What *can* he see in that face?' she added, pointing to the portrait.

'Quite common-looking,' said Elizabeth.

'Such a high, vulgar complexion,' said Clementina.

‘She has no manners, that’s certain,’ said Miss Tucker.

‘And she dresses vilely.—Who’s that coming?’

It was a false alarm; but the sisters locked up the cupboard, and stole out of the house again, unseen by the servants. It was lucky for them they did so, for in a moment they saw Ambrose coming along the road.

Ambrose had been sorely perplexed of late. There was nothing doing in empty London, and he could not be happy in Baybridge, where love and ambition wrestled together in his heart all the day long. He had a holiday, but his mother would not listen to his proposal for a trip to the seaside. Mrs. Jackson did not intend, at this critical juncture, to separate him from Judith; and Ambrose, who could not bear to refuse her anything, gave up the project.

He was angry with himself for giving it up almost readily ; for not being able to leave off thinking of Judith. If only there had been hard work for him just now, when work was essential to his peace of mind, all had been well. As it was, instead of breasting the current, he . . . the man of inflexible purpose . . . allowed himself to float down it, and hardly resisted his mother's many schemes for throwing him and Judith together. Thanks to the Tuckers and other busybodies, they were now so much spoken of as destined for one another . . . in spite of Mrs. Tweedy's busy tongue asserting the contrary . . . that Ambrose plainly perceived, that, unless he was to take that step which he had decided not to take, he must resolutely break off all connection with Baybridge. It had come to this : he could not trust himself alone with Judith, a glance from her shook his firmness to its

foundation. The certainty that she too must be suffering from the miserable tittle-tattle of the town, positively kept him awake at night. He could not marry her, that was impossible; but he could and he would save her from this annoyance. As he now came along, he thought of consulting his mother as to the necessity of her seeking a home elsewhere. Here again was a rub—was it not cruel of him to take her among strangers? Ambrose was sure he could not be so heartless; and the problem remained unsolved.

With such perplexities tormenting him, he was not gratified to see their chief promoters, the Misses Tucker, waiting at the corner of the road with the evident intention of speaking to him. He had not exchanged a word with either of them since the passage of arms on the river bank; and he now tried to pass with a formal

salutation. The attempt was unsuccessful.

‘How do you do, Mr. Jackson?’ said Elizabeth, in her gentlest manner; advancing with outstretched hand, which she obliged him to take. ‘We have just been to call upon dear Mrs. Jackson, and unfortunately found her gone out. Clem and I were so sorry.’

Mr. Jackson bowed his acknowledgments stiffly.

‘You have come down for a holiday, haven’t you?’ asked Clementina.

‘Yes,’ said Ambrose.

‘You aren’t going to the seaside, after all?’ inquired Elizabeth.

‘No,’ answered he.

‘Why will you be so short with us?’ complained Miss Tucker. ‘Why will you persist in regarding us as your enemies?’

‘I have not thought much about the subject,’ said Ambrose.

‘We would like to gain your friendship, Mr. Jackson,’ persisted Elizabeth.

‘I am afraid I could not be worthy of yours,’ returned the young man, wondering to what new act of spite this civility was a prelude.

‘Oh, how can you say so,’ replied Miss Tucker. ‘We really take such an interest in you, Mr. Jackson ; we think you so very clever. We are sure that you will rise.’

‘Chiefly owing to the good-nature of my acquaintances,’ said Ambrose. ‘I am sure Miss Tucker would help me if it lay in her power.’

‘I would indeed,’ said Elizabeth, keeping her temper. ‘Clem and I are so glad to think you will be in Baybridge for a couple of weeks at least, aren’t we, Clem?’

‘Of course Mr. Jackson knows that,’ said Clementina. ‘Somebody else will be glad too!’

‘You mean Miss Topham, Clem!’ said Elizabeth, with what was intended to be an arch look. ‘O, how can you be so wicked. You have quite vexed Mr. Jackson.’

‘I don’t think it worth while to be vexed,’ said Ambrose. ‘But as you have not scrupled to connect Miss Topham’s name with mine, and as you charge yourselves with the pleasant duty of circulating the parish news, I take the liberty of contradicting this particular report.’

‘It’s in everybody’s mouth,’ said Elizabeth, maliciously.

‘Maybe,’ replied Ambrose; ‘but it all bears the sign-manual of Miss Tucker.’

‘And you deny that there’s an engagement coming on between you and Judith Topham?’ said Elizabeth.

‘I deny,’ retorted Ambrose, warmly, ‘that you have a right to pry into my affairs or into hers; but as you have asked the question, please remember the answer, No!’

‘We can’t take Mr. Jackson seriously, Clem dearest, can we?’ said Miss Tucker. ‘Not after the portrait!’

‘No, not after the portrait,’ echoed Clementina.

‘I don’t understand you,’ said Ambrose, ‘and I hope you’ll allow me to go indoors.’

But Miss Tucker planted herself well in the way. She saw at once that Ambrose had spoken the truth, that he knew nothing of the portrait. Vaguely but deliciously the idea came to her that she might cause a breach between mother and son; something in Ambrose’s startled uneasy expression favoured this charitable hope.

‘Ask Mrs. Jackson,’ she said, ‘why she has painted such a beautiful portrait of Judith Topham, ask! Perhaps as a pleasant surprise for you. Perhaps she has been doing a little match-making for you.’

‘My mother has painted no such portrait,’ stammered Ambrose.

‘O, indeed! We know better Clem, my love, don’t we?’

‘O, yes, we know much better,’ said Clem.

‘*Good-morning*, Mr. Jackson,’ said Elizabeth.

‘*Good-morning*, Mr. Jackson,’ echoed Clementina.

And the sisters, satisfied with their victory, walked away arm-in-arm.

‘She-devils!’ muttered Ambrose. ‘Surely my mother can’t——’

And he went indoors hurriedly, expecting to find Mrs. Jackson shut up in the studio.

The studio was empty. Ambrose strode up and down it, awaiting his mother’s return with impatience. Already he had no doubt that she had been guilty of this imprudence.

‘That settles the matter,’ he exclaimed.

‘Those hags will tell their tale everywhere, and Judith will be fatally compromised. In honour bound I must marry her now, and sink into hum-drum mediocrity.’

Mrs. Jackson, who expected her son by a later train, returned, and hurrying into the studio, was much surprised to find him there.

‘What’s the matter, dear boy?’ she asked, for, though he kissed her with his usual affection, he looked very stern.

‘What have you done, mother?’ he replied.

‘I, Ambrose!’

‘The portrait?’

‘Is that all?’ said she. ‘You’re going to scold me for keeping a secret from you. However did you find me out? Vexed, dear? Say no. I couldn’t tell you Mr. Sutton’s secret, could I?’

‘Sutton’s?’

His mother explained.

‘It’s a most unfortunate business,’ he said, when she had done telling her story. ‘What was the good of my publishing the fact that I had “no intentions,” if you were working like this against me?’

‘I meant no harm, Ambrose.’

‘I’m sure you didn’t,’ he answered, gently. ‘I suppose, though, in my absence, the young lady has come here frequently to “sit”?’

‘Judith? No. The portrait was to be a surprise for her mother, as I told you, and to be kept a secret from everybody. So Mr. Sutton wished. I worked from memory, and from a small sketch I had taken previously.’

‘A secret from everybody?’ asked Ambrose, quickly. ‘Why from Judith herself? As if she couldn’t be discreet! Didn’t that strike you as peculiar?’

‘It didn’t at the time ; it does now,’ admitted the widow.

‘And you can’t find an explanation?’ said Ambrose. ‘Sutton is in love with her.’

The widow changed colour, and gasped rather than said,

‘Impossible!’

‘So one would think,’ said Ambrose ; ‘he’s twenty years older and more. A useless, unpractical dreamer, with absolutely nothing to show for his five-and-forty years of life.’

‘I like Will Sutton,’ protested the widow. ‘He is a—a—favourite with me. I hope you’ll change your verdict some day. In the meantime, don’t be vexed about my harmless little plot. I’ve been less imprudent than you think, for I always lock up my work. You haven’t yet said how you found me out?’

‘The Tucker women told me. They were

in here half-an-hour ago, and turned everything upside down, I suppose. By now, thanks to them, half Baybridge is convinced that you have painted Judith—for me. The matter has gone too far. I must marry her.'

His mother's face was radiant.

'You couldn't make a wiser choice, Ambrose,' she said. 'No one else could suit you like Judith. This has been the wish of my heart, to see you well married before I am taken away from you.'

'Let me see the ill-fated picture,' was all that Ambrose could reply.

She placed it on the easel, and pulled up a blind. Ambrose gazed long and earnestly, and his eyes softened.

'You've painted well before, mother, but you've never done anything equal to this.'

The artist smiled.

'It was a labour of love, dear boy. Per-

haps, too, it is being judged by love?’

‘Yes, mother,’ said Ambrose, in his deep, quiet tone, ‘I do love Judith. Such worth, such gentleness, such high and pure motives, where else should I find them? She is too good for me, a thousand times too good—but——’

‘Let there be no “but,” Ambrose,’ said his mother, softly. ‘You will find happiness in Judith’s love which you will never find in your own ambition.’

It was an unfortunate speech. Ambrose began to pace up and down the room in great agitation.

‘Mother, mother,’ he exclaimed at length, ‘you meant well, but you have placed a stumbling-block in my path that I can never leap over. You talk of my ambition: I marry Judith—farewell to my ambition!’

‘You’re angry with me, Ambrose?’

‘Angry with you, mother—never! May I suffer from every ill that ingratitude deserves if ever I forget your devotion. Who was it slaved to give me the education of a gentleman, long before I could understand such love? You! Who trod the path of self-sacrifice daily, hourly for my sake? You, darling mother! And, if to call Judith your daughter would make you happy, at your feet I lay the sacrifice down.—Wait here till I can bring the news.’

He folded her in his arms, the one he tried to love without a taint of selfishness. She wanted to warn him against approaching Judith too proudly, but he laid his fingers upon her lips.

Another moment and he strode out of the house, on the way to claim Judith Topham for his wife.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PROPOSAL.

WE have seen how Ambrose had been employed during the morning, and with what intention he set out in search of Judith. We must now go back a few hours and see how they had been spent by that young lady, so as to form as correct an opinion as possible of the state of mind she was in when she received his important visit.

Judith had to be an early riser if she hoped to get through the duties of the day, and she was in the habit of leaving her bed-room curtains undrawn so that the light might awaken her. This morning it was not five o'clock when she opened her

eyes, and knowing from experience the danger of closing them again, and possessing, besides, that active energy which is never so thoroughly tested as in the simple matter of 'getting up,' jumped out of bed. She sat on the edge for a moment, rubbing her eyes and twining one slender foot about the other, and then decided that it was a lovely morning. After a long look down into the garden with the cool hush of dawn upon it, she began her toilette. Perhaps the vigorous way in which she splashed and scrubbed in her cold tub had something to do with that clear, vivid complexion of hers, which roused such envy in the breasts of the pasty-faced Misses Tucker. Then she knelt down and prayed at her bed-side, little dreaming how eventful the day was to prove, and how sore would be her need of comfort. Then followed a brushing and plaiting of her soft

brown hair, with a pardonable roguish little glance of vanity in the looking-glass. Lastly came the neat, clean print dress. She stole into Annie's room, and kissed the sleeping girl, who smiled at her touch.

Then the energetic housekeeper crept upstairs in her stocking feet, and shook the servants, and 'cold-pigged' them, so as to be sure that they would follow her good example. Downstairs, she put on her boots, and ran out into the garden. The flowers were hung with dew. The birds sang. Judith sang too, because her heart was light and happy on this glorious summer morning.

But as it was ever so long ago since Ambrose had become the centre-figure of any picture of happiness which she drew, she naturally thought of Ambrose. Alas! to think of him was not only to love but to doubt. Judith reminded herself that

there was work to be done indoors, and that she had better go indoors and do it. She went in accordingly, and her appearance caused a great increase of activity in the sweeping and dusting line, though the servants admired and liked Miss Judith, and seldom shirked their work. Judith had a maxim that everything *must* be clean, and if nobody else would work she would. This method shamed Barbara and Jane into good behaviour.

Mrs. Topham, who rarely came down before breakfast, surprised Judith to-day by appearing at half-past eight.

‘Come into the dining-room, Jue, I want to say a few words before your father speaks to you.’

‘He doesn’t want any money?’ asked Judith, seeing that her mother looked very anxious.

‘No,’ replied Mrs. Topham, nervously.

She had succeeded in keeping her husband's new investment a secret even from Judith. 'It's about you and Ambrose. You haven't taken me into your confidence, Jue, and I'm sure you have had some good reason for not doing so.'

'I thought it was better not to talk about it, mother, unless anything happened. I didn't want to add to your anxieties.'

'I understand all you mean, my dear child. But, as your father is going to speak to you this morning on the subject, I wish to set my doubts at rest, and to give you a word of warning. You love him, Jue?'

'Yes, mother.'

'Very much?'

'Better than the whole world,' answered Judith, without hesitation.

'If he proposes, you'll consent to be his wife?'

‘I don’t know, mother, what I shall do. I shall do what I think to be right when the time comes, if ever it does come. I love Ambrose, I will never love anyone else. But I sometimes think . . . even when my love is greatest . . . that he is hard and selfish, and might want to marry me, and then repent. If he comes simply and frankly, saying, “I give you my heart and want yours in return,” then, mother, your Judith won’t know what to do with all her happiness. But if his love is a prudent, calculating love, then, mother, though my heart should break, I hope, I pray, I may be firm and answer No.—But what is father going to say about it?’

Mrs. Topham lowered her voice, as she always did when circumstances forced her for the moment to entertain the idea that Peter was not absolutely perfect, and replied,

‘He is going to ask for a promise from you that you will refuse Ambrose——’

‘Never,’ interrupted Judith, ‘as I alone would have to bear the consequences of my choice, it’s only fair that my choice should be free.’

‘Yes, Jue, you’re quite right,’ answered Mrs. Topham, looking as if in thus opposing her husband she had committed a felony at the least. ‘But don’t vex your father, treat him with proper respect, Judith; remember all he has gone through.’

Judith promised gently; if there was one thing on this earth sacred to her it was her mother’s devotion for the head of the family. Mrs. Topham had still something more to say—about Will Sutton. But Peter and Annie joined them, and the opportunity was lost.

It was evident that Peter Topham had thoroughly made up his mind that Am-

brose Jackson should never have the honour of being his son-in-law, and it was equally evident that he expected resistance on the part of Judith. He received her dutiful kiss more coldly than usual, and soon showed himself to be in a perverse humour. He did not grumble or growl. He maintained his reputation for cheerfulness. But his light bitter tongue complained of everything that was set before him—because Judith did the house-keeping. The butter was bad. The bacon was bad. The eggs were not fresh. Judith listened patiently; she would bear anything, but she would not make that promise which was going to be demanded of her.

‘Don’t promise anything,’ whispered Annie to her, as they rose from breakfast.

Mr. Topham turned to Judith.

‘Please come to my study in half-an-hour, Judith.’ His tone implied, ‘And when you do come, be tractable.’

‘Shut the door, Judith,’ he said, when she reached the study. ‘I want to talk to you seriously. Reports have been flying about Baybridge of a very distressing nature. They have reached your ears, of course?’

Judith was not going to admit that any report connecting her name and Ambrose Jackson’s was in itself distressing.

‘I suppose you must mean about Mr. Jackson, father?’ she said.

‘Don’t be such a hypocrite, Judith. Who else could I mean except the young place-hunter? I’m afraid you’ve been imprudent, child. His pushing, vulgar manner has imposed upon you. Kindly don’t interrupt me ; that’s ill-bred, as you ought to know. I say you have been imprudent, and I fear that the fellow will propose—not a distinction that I was at all anxious for. However, you may still be able to prevent it by letting him see unmistakably that you don’t covet the honour.’

‘But if I do, father?’

‘I will not have you unmaidenly, Judith. I won’t have you throw yourself at any man’s head.’

‘I’ve never so disgraced myself, and never will,’ said Judith, struggling hard to keep from crying.

‘You will keep him at arm’s length,’ said her father.

‘But, father, if he will propose, what can I do?’

‘If you didn’t care for him, you’d prevent him from opening his lips fast enough.’

‘But I do care for him—very much,’ ventured Judith.

‘Come, come, Jue,’ said Peter Topham, ‘if it pleases your vanity to have an offer, do as you please. But I expect you to refuse him unconditionally.’

Judith spoke up.

‘I’ve loved you, and done everything I

could for you, father. But I'll never make that promise.'

'He is a selfish, pompous young fellow,' said Mr. Topham. 'I'll never admit him into my family. You must give him up.'

'If ever I give him up, it will be of my own free will and not from compulsion,' said Judith. 'Father, can't you understand that I love him very dearly? Why have you taken such a dislike to him?'

'I asked him to dinner at your mother's request,' said Peter, 'and at my own table he flatly contradicted me. He has no manners.'

'He was sorry about that afterwards,' pleaded Judith. 'He told me so the same night.'

'If he was sorry, he should have apologised to *me*,' said Mr. Topham. 'That would have been the manly course.'

'He's every inch a man,' said Judith,

obstinately. And the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her father mistook this sign of distress for submission.

‘Now be a good girl, Jue, and don’t cry about it. Be cheerful. Follow my example. I’m not allowing this little matter to make me gloomy. Promise you’ll refuse him.’

‘I’ll obey you in anything else.’

‘Except where obedience is wanted, you’ll be obedient, doubtless.—Now what do you think of Radalls?’

Radalls, it will be remembered, was the name of Will Sutton’s estate. Judith could not follow her father’s train of thought, or understand the sudden change of subject. She answered, mechanically,

‘Of Radalls, father?’

‘Yes, it’s a fine estate, isn’t it? Will has improved it very much of late years. Now,

be reasonable, Judith. Wouldn't it be better for you, instead of giving yourself away to this selfish young place-hunter, to be mistress of Radalls ?'

'I don't understand,' replied Judith, bluntly.

'Don't be affected, child,' said Peter, vexed because he saw that she really did not understand. 'Everybody knows that Will Sutton is longing to marry you.'

'Will!' exclaimed Judith.

Her father's words were a revelation. She knew at once that it was true, that Will did love her. She marvelled how she could have been so blind, and yet her want of perception in this instance was perfectly natural. It had never struck her that a man twenty years older than she was, who had kissed her in such a fatherly manner, who was so near and dear a friend—could look upon their intimacy in any other

light. Besides, she had been so taken up with Ambrose; she was so repeatedly asking herself whether he in truth cared for her, that affection from any other quarter came as a total surprise. But her father was right. She understood now, with a pang of remorse, all that Will had suffered on the day of their visit to Radalls, and resolved instantly to show him some kindness, to make him some amends. His silent fidelity, his patience, touched her, and her father saw her lips trembling.

‘It’s a fine property, Jue. You’d have a position in the county. He’d give you plenty of pin-money.’

Judith’s face hardened.

‘And then your mother—think of the many comforts such a marriage would secure to her.’

‘I’m fond of Will, father; but I could never marry him.’

‘No, you’ve got some silly school-girl notions into your head. You’ll go your own way, of course. My advice is not worth considering. I know nothing of the world. I am no judge of character. Go, Judith, I thought you had some affection for me, or at least for your mother.’

Judith obeyed and left the room. She knew her father too well to make any attempt to soften him. She tried hard not to despise the parent to whom she owed reverence. She bore from him . . . chiefly for her mother’s sake . . . what was well-nigh unendurable. But she had to own that her father was beyond all things selfish. A dread took possession of her that perhaps Ambrose, when he grew old, might be like this. And so it happened, that when she and Ambrose met to-day, she was peculiarly sensitive to any exhibition of this spirit. Ambrose had chosen an unfortunate day for his attempt.

Ambrose was not far from the house now ; but his usually quick, firm step was slow and undecided. He never doubted that Judith would accept him, for he was accustomed to gain other points for which he strove, and Judith was too artless not to have betrayed her feelings for him. Ambrose knew that he had won her heart, and that such a heart was well worth the winning. But there was no concealing the truth that when she became his wife he would have to close his account with the old life, and begin a new life involving much sacrifice. That he looked upon the union as a sacrifice was clear from his parting words to his mother.

Ambrose, as secretary to Mr. Mackintosh, one of the political lights of the day, enjoyed a good many social privileges which he had not valued aright until now, when he seemed on the point of forfeiting them.

The path he had climbed hitherto had been rough, but not without flowers by the way. Half-confidences from handsome, fashionable women desirous of finding out Mr. Mackintosh's views for their husbands; dinners where celebrities jogged your elbow and even condescended to approve of your goings on; these things so very pleasant for Mr. Jackson unattached, would they not become memories after marriage? There was also a certain young widow, Alice Murray by name, who lived in Park Lane, and had wealth and a certain style of beauty, and was very civil to the young politician of promise. Would she honour him with those little scented notes, naming an hour when she could receive her especial friends, or scolding him for playing truant? Ambrose was quite sure that Mrs Murray would do nothing of the sort. What remarks were to be expected from

his troops of friends, who had prophesied so great things for him, if he married a girl from Baybridge? A man may be indifferent to criticism in other matters, but about a wife he is apt to be sensitive; and so it fared with Ambrose.

A sacrifice the marriage would be without a doubt. But Ambrose, though blinded by ambition and pride, and by that self-assertion which is so often the bosom sin of a successful young man . . . was at heart a gentleman. Judith should never suspect that he was making a sacrifice. Such was his firm resolve when he entered the house. But how difficult it often proves to hide our real thoughts on such occasions; the more important the interview, the greater the stake, the more likely are they to come to the surface, and work havoc among our best intentions.

Ambrose was shown into the drawing-

room, where he was soon joined by the sisters and by Cris Parry. Cris guessed his friend's errand, and so strolled through the open window on to the terrace to smoke a cigarette. Annie followed him.

Judith and Ambrose were left alone. Judith hardly dared to look up ; there was something in the manner in which Ambrose shook hands with her which implied what was coming. A few words, whatever effect they might have upon him, would lay a firm foundation for her own happiness or else for ever utterly destroy it. Ambrose, usually so much at his ease, was obviously nervous and had nothing to say for himself. The silence grew so painful that Judith, though she was trembling all over, broke it by an inquiry after Mrs. Jackson's health. Ambrose thanked her, his mother was fairly well. Then Judith, by way of leading to some sort of

conversation, asked what Mrs. Jackson had been painting lately.

Nothing, could she but have known it, could have been more ill-timed than this question. It recalled to Ambrose that unfortunate portrait, without which he would not have been sitting by Judith now with the full intention of asking her to be his wife. He told her about the portrait, and about the Tuckers, and went on to deplore that so few people could mind their own business. Judith's suspicions were confirmed; she read the truth in every word and gesture—that he had been driven to her side, and felt himself aggrieved. She grew pale, and prepared her answer.

‘I can’t tell you, Miss Topham,’ said he, ‘how cut up I have been at the thought of all you must have suffered from this tittle-tattle. I certainly did my best to contradict and put it down. That your name,

for which I've learnt so deep a respect, should be bandied about by these chattering, ill-natured women has been—has been very hard for me to bear.'

He paused, but if he expected any answer he was disappointed, for Judith did not say a word.

'Fortunately,' said Ambrose, 'there's a way to silence these contemptible people. Miss Topham—Judith, I'm going to ask you a very important question. Please be indulgent. You know that I'm a hard-working, earnest man, and that if I undertake to help and guide you, I will do so to the utmost of my ability. I'm not well off, and it's hard to get on in these days of competition, unless one has more connections than I can ever boast of. But you are too good, too true for such considerations. Will you marry me, Judith?'

Judith's head had been bowed while he

spoke. She now raised it and her face was deadly pale. There was great pain written on it, love not to be uttered, and resolution not to be overcome.

‘Do you love me, Mr. Jackson?’ she asked.

He started up.

‘Love you? Why, Judith! Don’t you understand that’s just what I’ve been saying?’

‘You said nothing about that,’ murmured she; ‘you forgot that.’

‘But surely you know all I mean——’ he began.

‘I fear, Mr. Jackson,’ she answered, in a low, sad tone, ‘that I know more of your thoughts than you suppose or wish. You have asked me to be your wife—I cannot fill the position. I thank you—and—and that is all.’

‘You refuse!’ cried Ambrose.

She bowed her head again.

‘I refuse.’

‘But, Judith . . . no, don’t turn your head away like that . . . listen to me. I spoke awkwardly, but you must feel, I am sure, how much I do love you—how greatly in earnest I am.’

‘No, Mr. Jackson, you are not in earnest. You think I have been compromised. You think yourself bound to make me this proposal. You have acted, not from what you felt, but from what you thought it your duty to do. Don’t speak, please, for one moment. If you had really loved me, you would not have sat there and offered me your love as if it were a dead, cold thing, instead of being precious——’

‘Judith!’

‘No, no, have pity on me and say no more. If you had been in earnest, you would have thrown yourself at my feet half-an-hour ago—in the most critical ac-

tion of your life, *you* at least would not have been half-hearted. You have fulfilled what you supposed to be an obligation, you have saved me from the busybodies: in proposing you have done your duty, in refusing I have done mine.'

Ambrose knew that she spoke the truth, but her attitude was so totally unexpected that he was filled with consternation. This country girl, whom he had not thought good enough for him, had in plain terms rejected his offer. It was the first serious check in his life, it was the first blow that taught him that even he could be weak. He saw that Judith loved him. Her beauty, her distress, her courage thrilled him. He threw self to the winds, he trampled the demon down,—but it was too late.

'Judith!' he cried, 'don't treat me cruelly. I know that you love me. I know that I'm full of faults, that I'm hard,

proud, selfish—but how can I get rid of these faults unless I have somebody to correct me? Be my teacher, dear, dear Judith. I am at your feet now, Judith.'

She trembled violently. If he had only spoken like this at first. There he was, as he said, at her feet, and she half believed that she was dearer to him than his ambition.

'I'm not cruel,' she said, piteously. 'I want to do you justice. But I won't yield to what is a joy now if in the future it is to turn to bitterness. I won't become your wife, and drag you down.'

'*You* drag me down! Pardon, pardon, Judith!'

'Will you answer one question, most truly?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Did you or did you not lead Mrs. Tweedy to believe that in marrying me you would be marrying beneath you?'

Ambrose turned as white as a sheet.

Judith walked towards the door.

‘Stop!’ he cried, following her and taking her hand, ‘I’ve been a fool, a vain, empty-headed fool. Forgive me, don’t let this be your answer.’

‘It *is* my answer. I’m doing what is right,’ whispered Judith.

Then she was gone.

The young man walked quickly up and down the room once or twice, crushed his hat over his brows, and strode out of the house.

Judith lay in her mother’s arms, moaning over and over again between her sobs that she had done right, and that her heart was broken.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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